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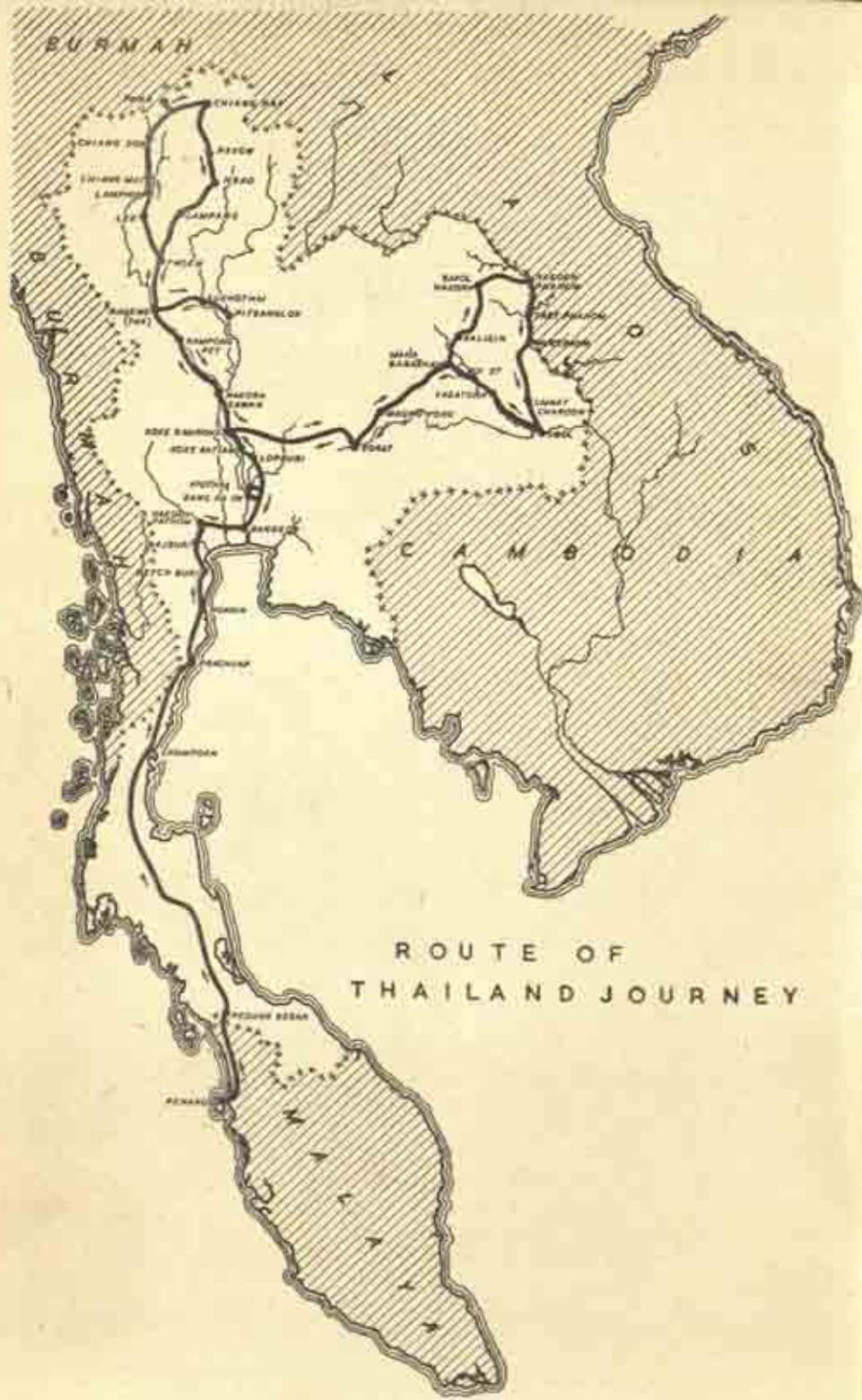
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ROUTE OF  
THAILAND JOURNEY

*Thailand Journey*

*Major W. T. Blake has also written*

THE PAMPAS AND THE ANDES  
PORTS OF CALL  
DESERT ADVENTURES  
FLYING ROUND THE WORLD  
FLYING  
ETC.

*and under the name of "Wing Adjutant"*

THE ROYAL FLYING CORPS IN THE WAR  
PLANE TALES FROM THE SKIES  
OVER "OVER THERE"  
TO-DAY WITH THE R.A.F.



In the Royal Palace, Bangkok.





*Photo: Vandyk*

1. His Royal Highness Prince Chula Chakrabongse and Princess Elizabeth Chakrabongse taken in London before attending the State Banquet when His Royal Highness represented His Majesty the King of Thailand at the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in June, 1953

# THAILAND JOURNEY

By  
W. T. BLAKE

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*Bla*



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To

*His Royal Highness*

*Prince Chula Chakrabongse of Thailand, G.C.V.O.*

*to whose suggestion Thailand Journey  
owes its inception and without whose  
help the journey would not have been  
possible*

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## Foreword

THAI names present many difficulties in spelling and pronunciation to an Occidental. In this book I have spelt the names of towns as they sounded to me in nearly all cases, with the exception of one or two places which have a well-known European-style spelling, e.g. Ubol, pronounced Ubon.

The names of people are as they have themselves written them for me or have them printed on their visiting cards. Even these are misleading. For example, Capt. *Bisdar Chulasewok* (in the European form) is called "Pissadarn" in his own country.

I have done my best but am quite prepared to be shot at by scholars.

The total distance of the journey was about 4,000 miles and took place during January, February and March of 1955.

There are many people to whom I most gratefully offer my thanks for help in connection with the journey; indeed without their help it would not have been possible. First of these is H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse of Thailand. He suggested the attempt and asked various Ministries in Thailand to help us. Before starting he gave me much good advice and information and on our return kindly read the MSS. of this book to check any inaccuracies. His forthcoming book *An Eastern Prince Came West* which he allowed me to read in manuscript also gave me a good deal of information on the history, religion and customs of the country. To Capt. Bisdar Chulasewok, Prince Chula's Agent in Bangkok and his charming wife Pungpit I also owe a debt of gratitude for smoothing our path through government and other channels

## FOREWORD

and helping us in so many ways in Thailand. Capt Bisdar Chulasewok interpreted Prince Chula's request, that he should help us, most liberally and spared neither time nor trouble on our behalf. His staff, in turn, were all most helpful.

In England, Shura Rahm, Prince Chula's European Manager; Ronnie Potts and Bien Chulindra all helped greatly in our preparations and after our return. Shura Rahm's advice on photography was particularly valuable.

Among the public authorities of Thailand my thanks go to the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Communications and General Phao Sriyanond, the Chief of Police and the many Police Officers and men who were our almost constant companions. Some I have mentioned by name but all, without exception, were highly efficient and kindly friends who helped us in so many ways, personally as well as officially. They were a happy and amusing lot, pleasant companions and, I believe, as amused with us as we were with them.

I must also thank the Governors of Provinces and their staffs, who entertained us and looked after us so well whilst we were in territory under their jurisdiction. They certainly took the foreign visitors under their wings most efficiently and were kind and thoughtful hosts.

Last but not one I must thank our Standard Vanguard car PDU 4 without whose perfect efficiency and amazing reliability we certainly could not have made the journey.

And last of all my thanks go to my wife who did her share of the work like a Trojan and kept going cheerfully early and late. A better or more efficient companion for a rough (or smooth!) journey never existed.

St. Columb, Cornwall

W. T. BLAKE.

*May, 1955*

## *Introduction*

by H.R.H. PRINCE CHULA CHAKRABONGSE OF THAILAND,  
G.C.V.O.

MAJOR WILFRID BLAKE and I have adopted Cornwall as our home. I think we may both dare to say that we have also in some way been adopted by Cornwall. In my case probably because I served for two years as a Private in the Cornish Home Guard of World War II. Anyhow, if we have been so adopted we are very proud of the fact. In my case, of course, I have my other home in my own country—Thailand—to which I return every year if possible.

It is of this country that Major Blake has written this charming and informative book in which he has recorded his lively impressions of the motor-car journeys which he has made in that country with the lady who is his wife, companion and staunch supporter in all his enterprises.

With characteristic warmth of heart, Major Blake has made extremely kind references to the help which I was only too glad to give him, but which help would have been impossible without the natural friendliness of my people to support it. I am happy to know that you will find references to this innate kindness and friendliness of the Thai people again and again throughout the book. A good book cannot just give praises all the way through and Major Blake has also found things to criticize. He thinks the majority of our roads are frightful but that is hardly surprising. When my Grandfather, and later two uncles, were ruling Thailand as absolute monarchs, they tried to do so with the minimum of taxation. Thus material progress, although sure, had neces-



sarily to be slow. So their policy of transport was concentrated in the construction of railways. Roads were only built to feed railheads. By the time the absolute regime ended, some 2,000 miles of railways had been constructed. You will hear but little of the railways in this book as Major Blake travelled by road. I may add that the railways suffered very severely during World War II and have not yet recovered. The road-building scheme was initiated by the modern regime only since 1932—then interrupted by the war years—so that they have had less than fifteen years for the work. When this book becomes a classic book about Thailand, which I am sure it will in years to come, Major and Mrs. Blake will go down in our history as pioneer travellers over our as yet frightful roads. The aim has been to cut roads everywhere first and good surface will come later.

Like most Englishmen, Major Blake has a sense of humour and now and again we find him laughing at us as much as at himself. But it is all laughter and fun from a real friend and I feel sure that our people will also enjoy his jokes as heartily as British and other readers.

I was very touched by his references to the efficiency and smartness of Thai troops on parade. They are not only parade ground soldiers, but also fighting soldiers as testified by the valour shown by them recently in the front line in Korea where they fought side by side with troops of the United Nations.

I am sure everyone in Thailand enjoyed meeting Major and Mrs. Blake and will gladly join with me in saying, "Come back again soon even if the roads will not be very much better."

CHULA CHAKRABONGSE,  
Prince of Thailand.

Tredethy,  
near Bodmin, Cornwall, England



2. King Mongkut's Palace, Petchburi. King Mongkut was referred to in the film "Anna and the King of Siam"



3. The Wat Arun or Temple of the Dawn, Bangkok



4. The pavilion and statue to King Chulalongkorn at Bang-Pa-In



5. Fresco of Demons, Wat Arun, Bangkok

## *Purely Introductory: On board S.S. Singapore*

DURING the Summer Ball at St. Eval R.A.F. station His Royal Highness Prince Chula Chakrabongse of Thailand, who had read my South American book, *The Pampas and the Andes*, said to me:

"Why don't you take your car to my country and write a book about it? I'll give you all the help I can."

And so came about the journey which my wife and I are about to commence. As I write we are on the S.S. *Singapore* bound for Penang, where our journey will really begin. At this point it may be of interest to set down what we have been told about the country and what we expect to see. Later it may be amusing when compared with what we do see!

Of all the countries in which we have proposed to travel Thailand, still better known to most people as Siam, has been the most enigmatic. There are comparatively few books about the country and people who have been there seem, for the most part, to have been content to sit in Bangkok and leave the rest of the country to their imaginations. Of course there are many British people who have travelled widely in Thailand and lived there for years but they appear to be inarticulate and, on their return to England have forgotten what they have seen or be possessed by some peculiar reticence which prevents them speaking about those things which they have seen. I wonder if the country will affect us like that. I hope not or this book will never be written!

What do we really expect to see? From the scanty information dragged from unwilling one-time residents we are going to a country of kindly people where the air is filled with dense swarms of hungry mosquitoes, longing for an



opportunity to taste fresh blood. Every mouthful of food we eat must have the innumerable flies brushed off with one hand as we rapidly push it into our mouths with the other. (This actually did happen in Mesopotamia during the first world war; to eat bread and jam was almost impossible.) In consequence diseases of all kinds are rife and, according to our kindly informants, we shall be lucky to come home alive. Further, the temperature is almost invariably in the neighbourhood of 100° F. and so moist is the air that one must endure a constant Turkish bath. How fortunate that we have travelled much in little-known lands and have long ago learnt not to believe one-quarter of the things we are told; otherwise I am sure we should never have left England on this "expedition".

As regards food, starvation obviously stares us in the face. Thailand is a Buddhist country and meat is not on the menu. Vegetables are grown in such nameless ways that it is highly dangerous to eat them. The same applies to fruit. Fish from the rivers are muddy and inedible. The staple diet is rice and this, of course, induces the horrid disease of beriberi. One well-wisher suggested we should take a food supply of tinned foods from England. Water must not, on any account, be drunk or typhoid will at once set in. All drinks must be bottled and even then should not be consumed unless from a well-known factory. Ice of course, suffers from all the well-known defects of water, but in a much higher degree. (One well-wisher in Malaya, later, told us we must live on bottled beer and eggs!)

When we have enquired about the sights to be seen most people have been completely blank. They may have muttered something about temples and one has even mentioned an emerald Buddha but couldn't recall where it was. There is, apparently, nothing to be seen in Thailand.

Scenery has presented a great problem. I gather there are some forests here and there and one man spoke about teak but was curiously vague as to its whereabouts. If there are any beautiful parts of the country there is a conspiracy to keep them well hidden from the visitor.

Animals! Snakes? Yes, there are lots of snakes, all very poisonous and most of them attack on sight. You should certainly carry snake serum. Of course each snake needs a different serum so you must identify the snake first, then find the right serum and a hypodermic syringe. As you will probably die in a matter of minutes, long before the programme has been completed, why bother. Tigers do not seem to have impressed themselves on anyone, nor, curiously, elephants. In my ignorance I thought there were plenty of tigers and lots of elephants in the country but, apparently, I am wrong. Monkeys, too, are, seemingly, non-existent. And flowers? Oh, yes, lots of flowers but whether they are plants or shrubs, pink or red or blue or yellow we have not been told.

Hotels or rest houses might conceivably exist in one or two of the larger towns but they will probably be run by Chinese and be quite unusable. The charges for accommodation are wrapped in mystery. If any of our informants have ever stayed in one of these hotels they must have left without paying the bill. In not one single case have I been able to get any idea of costs. Let's hope our cash will last for the period of our stay. I have not even bothered to ask what private houses are like and no one has volunteered any information. Are they built of stone or wood? Bamboo huts or mud bricks? We must wait and see.

Here, in all fairness to Prince Chula and his household, I must emphasize that all these ideas did not come from him or his staff. Beyond saying that they are sure we shall like the country and showing us magnificent films of the temples of which Bangkok apparently consists and others of the very pleasant house on the seashore at Hua Hin belonging to Prince Chula, they have all tried to leave us with completely unbiased minds. In fact I think they will be as interested to hear what we find in Thailand as we shall be to find it.

Certainly our journey could not have begun under happier auspices. His Royal Highness has certainly kept his word in helping us. Not only has his agent in Siam, Captain Bisdar

Chulasewok, had our proposed route checked but he has enlisted the help of several Ministers and we feel happy in knowing that the police have all been asked to help us should we get into difficulties—not that we anticipate any. Further, his Comptroller in England, my friend Shura Rahm, has quietly watched over our plans and given unobtrusive advice whilst the Thai secretary, Bien Chulindra, has translated documents in Siamese for us, supplied an outline map of the roads as they are believed to exist and, to his evident amusement, solved one of our big difficulties. The Thai tongue is double dutch as far as my wife and I are concerned and when Prince Chula gave me the handbook of the Royal Automobile Club of Thailand, of which he is President, saying that it would give us all the information we required about routes and distances I was duly grateful—until I opened the book. Every town, every distance was given, but everything was, naturally, printed in Thai characters which to us were merely squiggles. When we also learned that the language is a tonic one and that the same word pitched high, low or medium might, and probably would, have as many different meanings we began to despair. Never before had we travelled in a country of which we could not speak one word of the language nor read one letter of the alphabet, which, in any case consists of forty-four letters and thirty-three vowels. Here Bien Chulindra came to our help. Whilst my wife and I selected phrases and words we thought we should need and typed them on to cards, Mr. Chulindra typed the equivalent Thai characters underneath and beneath that a phonetic effort at translation. Our intention is to select the phrase or word we want and show the Thai translation to the person concerned. If by chance he cannot read then we must try to pronounce the words but as I have no ear for music I shall probably ask for a cake of soap when I want to know the way to the next village. Unfortunately we lost our pack of cards soon after arriving in Thailand. Anyhow we are spared one difficulty. I am told there are no sign posts!

In making our arrangements various absurd difficulties have cropped up. The Standard Motor Co. were able to let



us have a new car at short notice, fitted with various gadgets we may need. Previous experience under difficult conditions has made us believe that the Vanguard is the best car for the job but on this one there are fittings for two-way radio and, amongst other gadgets, a compass. This compass gave us our first difficulty. As fitted by the Standard Company it gave a steady reading of South, no matter which way the car faced. Accordingly I asked the R.A.F. at St. Mawgan if they would swing the compass for me, the makers having provided a number of magnetic needles. Help was readily given and for the whole of one afternoon a Flying Officer, a Warrant Officer and myself manœuvred the car and stuck needles in the different apertures provided in the base of the compass. After much trial and error we got readings only a few degrees out, quite good enough for my purpose and I drove home. Next morning my wife said:

"Did you have anything done to the compass yesterday?"

"Yes, it was swung at St. Mawgan," I answered.

"Well when I took the car into St. Columb it didn't move no matter which way the car faced."

And it didn't—and doesn't. It has reverted to reading approximately south at all times. However there is an R.A.F. station near Penang. If there is time we will try again there. It would have to be re-adjusted anyhow.

Then steamship passages. After several agents had failed to get an offer of passages at approximately the time we wished to travel we visited the P. & O. Company. They at once fixed us up with a cabin and bath on the S.S. *Singapore* for Penang and arranged to carry the car. But neither they nor anyone else could offer us a return for at least nine months—or so they said. A suggestion to several companies that they should cable out to Bangkok or Penang to see what could be obtained there met with evasive answers or a blank refusal and after waiting for a few weeks to see if anything would turn up I went to B.O.A.C. who at once offered us passages to fly back at the date we wanted. P. & O. also came forward with an offer to bring back the car but still no cabin for us. About this time I met Prince

Chula again and mentioned our difficulty to him. He at once offered his help but as he was about to depart for South America and I did not hear any more for a couple of weeks I thought that in the rush of his departure he had forgotten us—quite understandably. Anyhow I accepted the offer of B.O.A.C. and took our return tickets by air. Two days later Shura Rahm rang me up to say the Thai Ambassador had communicated with him. Passages had been reserved for us from Bangkok. Later in the day the phone rang again. Through the good offices of Prince Axel of Denmark, who is a big personality in the East Asiatic Company, a cabin had been reserved for us from Bangkok. Next day I received a letter from Captain Bisdar; he also had reserved passages for us from Bangkok. Altogether we had put ourselves in an embarrassing position. We had underestimated Prince Chula's offer of help and the efficiency of his friends and staff and had paid for our air passages. All I could do was to thank everyone and apologize for the trouble we had given, whilst gratefully accepting accommodation in a homebound ship for our car from Bangkok.

Then we were in difficulties over arrangements with the Malay Railways. It had been suggested to us that we should go by sea to Penang, then travel by rail to Chumporn inside the Thailand frontier for various very good reasons. I therefore visited the Malay offices in London but beyond a schedule of two trains a week I got little information and no help so I wrote to Malaya for information and to enquire the fares for ourselves and the car. After several weeks delay I received the second of two letters which had been written, referring to a previous one which had not turned up. Unfortunately nearly all the information was in the letter which had gone astray. A cable produced a copy of the first letter and I therefore asked for the necessary accommodation to be reserved and, as only a little over two weeks remained before we sailed—an airmail letter takes four or five days!—I suggested that the railways should either cable me a confirmation or write to me at Aden, the last port of call before we reached Penang. I did not receive a cable before we left



but between Port Said and Aden a radiogram was handed me on the ship to say the Malay Railway authorities had sent all correspondence to me at Colombo. In reply I mentioned that the ship did not call at Colombo and requested confirmation to me on the ship. At last, I got confirmation of our bookings—a sleeper for ourselves and a truck for the car—and hope all will be well.

I wonder why nearly all concerns which have to deal with travel in any form are so hopelessly inefficient. The comfort or convenience of the passenger don't seem to be considered in the least. Any obstruction which can be placed in his way to prevent him travelling is placed in the most awkward position. Why do shipping companies always say there are no passages available and only produce accommodation under pressure? This ship has not got a full complement of passengers yet nearly everyone of us was told either that no passages were available and he must have his name put on the waiting list or that the ship was full. Why are railways, not only in Malaya, so dilatory and unwilling to part with information?

To all these groans I would add an appreciation of exactly the reverse attitude of the airways companies, B.O.A.C. in particular. Information is supplied by return of post, complicated schedules worked out with speed and accuracy, help given in every way. When one realizes the ramifications of B.O.A.C. and its associated companies about the world no wonder more and more people are taking to the air and leaving shipping and railway companies to pursue their policies of frustration and obstruction to the obvious end.

So there we are. We are now about five days from Penang and still wondering what Thailand will show us. As we hope to motor a good many thousands of miles to the north, west and east boundaries of the country and along the frontiers and are entering Thailand from the south we should see most things which are to be seen. We hope to see the towns and villages; stay in royal residences and wayside rest houses; enjoy what scenery the country has to offer; look at the beautiful and ancient buildings; watch the

## THAILAND JOURNEY

sports peculiar to the country; see the life of the people, rich and poor alike; eat strange foods; see wild animals and lovely flowers; watch elephants working; find out if Siam really has white elephants; and motor over roads and tracks, good, poor and bad. What we shall see will be faithfully recorded in the book.

## *Chapter One*

### *We Arrive in Thailand*

Two o'clock in the morning. As the international train from Malaya to Bangkok rattled and shook over the rails and my wife and I tried to sleep, whilst holding on to prevent ourselves rolling out of our bunks, I heard a gentle tapping on the door. Grumbling at having to climb down from the upper berth, I rolled out in the dark and opened up. In the dim light of the corridor I saw two officials and at once wondered what errors we had committed in crossing the frontier. Standing there in my pyjamas, tousle-headed and bleary-eyed, I was surprised to see our visitors come smartly to attention and salute, whilst one explained that he was in command of the local police force and had been sent by the Governor of the province to welcome us to Thailand and the other said that he was a government official sent with the police captain to act as interpreter and offer us his services in any respect in which we might need help.

Like most people, I am not at my best at two o'clock in the morning but even so was impressed by this, our first glimpse of the kindness and hospitality of the country through which my wife and I proposed trying to motor. Fortunately I remembered my manners sufficiently to thank them, whilst my wife made agreeable noises from her bunk and they bowed politely in her direction. I enquired if they had a sleeper in which to pass the rest of the night.

"No," said Captain Surachit. "We have no sleeper but we will find somewhere to wait until we reach Prachuap in about four hours' time. There we will take you to the bungalow which has been prepared for you and make arrangements for you to continue your journey."



## THAILAND JOURNEY

His English was not quite as good as this. He was obviously nervous and was helped out in his speaking by Nath On Yon, who was much more fluent if less easy to understand than his companion. They saluted and disappeared in the dimness of the corridor. I closed the door and returned to bed.

"Well," said my wife (who will henceforward be known as R.). "This seems a good start, anyhow. I can't imagine the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall sending the Chief Constable to meet an ordinary Thai visitor at Saltash. It certainly looks as if they're going to help us, but I wonder what's happened to the car."

We had arranged to take our Standard Vanguard from England to Thailand in an attempt to motor all over the country. In this we had been greatly helped by H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse of Thailand, who had promised his help to smooth away Government and administrative difficulties. Subsequently I wished he had also been able to smoothe the roads as well as he had smoothed officialdom. He had requested the help of various government departments and the police to help us in our journey and arrangements had been made that, after our arrival with the car at Penang in Malaya, we should put the car on the railway to take it through Northern Malaya and into Thailand as far as Chumporn, from where our motoring was to start. Malaya and the extreme south of Siam are still disturbed by bandits and communists, usually, as far as Thailand is concerned, of Malayan origin who cross the frontier to gain a respite from the constant harrying of the British troops in Malaya. The Thai authorities are collaborating with our officials in Malaya, but the whole of the frontier zone is in a state of mild unrest, in consequence of which no attempt has been made to build roads. We ourselves, after our enormous journey in South America, described in *The Pampas and the Andes*, had faith that our car would get over the jungle tracks from the Malayan border, but the Thais thought otherwise and we did not want to start our journey by refusing to accept their advice. Consequently arrange-

ments were made for the car to be put on the train at Penang.

The first indication of possible snags occurred when the Malayan station-master said he could only book the car as far as the frontier at Pedang Besar where, he told us, we should have to pay again to take it to Chumporn. Before we left we had a cable from Captain Bisdar Chulasewok, Prince Chula's agent in Bangkok, asking us to come to Prachuap as it would be difficult to off-load the car at Chumporn at two o'clock in the morning and by the time we reached Prachuap at 6 a.m. it would be getting light.

The snag occurred all right. At Pedang Besar the Thai customs and passport authorities welcomed us to their country and said they had instructions to pass us and the car through without any formalities. In fact they were so informal that I had the greatest difficulty in persuading them to sign the triptique for the car, which they asserted was completely unnecessary as we had been vouched for by H.R.H. Prince Chula. It was only when I explained to them that although I was perfectly sure everything would be all right in Thailand, I should have great difficulty in bringing the car back into England unless they signed the necessary forms, that, with a perfectly good grace, they did as I requested. But the station-master was not so helpful. He was quite pleasant and polite but quite firm. Although our car had travelled on its truck on the international train from Penang to Pedang Besar, he stated that this should not have been allowed and under no circumstances other than a direct order from the railway authorities in Bangkok could he allow an international train to tow such a mundane thing as a motor-car. I argued and pleaded with him to no effect. He said he would have it put on a special goods train and sent along after us and it would be at Prachuap within forty-eight hours; but put it on the international train he could not and would not. Even a letter from Prince Chula asking everyone to help us, which I carried for use in just such circumstances, failed to move him. He was obviously upset by the dilemma in which he found himself but considered

himself bound by his orders, which could only be countermanded by his own superior authorities. We had to leave the car to him and continue by train. In consequence, when we eventually arrived at Prachuap, just as dawn was breaking, we had to explain to Captain Surachit and Nath On Yon the difficulty in which we were placed.

"Oh, never mind," said Nath On Yon, "come to your bungalow first and then we will have breakfast and after that see what's the best thing to be done about your car."

So we descended from the train with our thirteen pieces of baggage. Captain Surachit walked with us through the awakening town to the seashore where a wooden bungalow on stilts had been made ready for us and where we could wash and bath. In a few minutes Nath On Yon appeared, smiling broadly, accompanied by two rickshaws loaded with our baggage. I must explain that Thai rickshaws or samlohs are not dragged or pushed by a trotting human being but are tricycles ridden by the owner, the rear part consisting of a pleasant seat with a hood, large enough to carry two Thais but not nearly large enough to carry two broad-in-the-beam British people. In consequence, whenever R. and I used these Thai rickshaws we always had to have two, much to the amusement and profit of the local owners.

Breakfast was our first experience of a Thai meal. Our escort took us from the bungalow to a small restaurant in the main street of Prachuap, a small place with a few tables, open to the street. The news that two foreigners had arrived soon spread and as such beings were unusual in Prachuap a small crowd gathered in the street to watch us eat. They stood there quietly, grinning from ear to ear in amusement at our, to them, queer appearance, whispering to one another, doubtless commenting on our bad manners, as displayed in the way we ate. Small children pressed close to the table to examine us more thoroughly. But the interest was friendly and both R. and I had the feeling that though we were obviously curiosities and amusing, they were at the same time pleased to have us with them.

The meal itself was a little unusual. Our two friends and



the restaurant proprietor had obviously put their heads together and discussed what English people had for breakfast. The result was a compromise between local food and our normal breakfast. An enormous dish covered with small bits of meat (beef, I *think*), eggs, raw tomatoes and lettuce, accompanied by bowls of soup. A large cup of milk and a cup of coffee half full of condensed milk made up the meal, during which time we discussed the problem of our car. We were expected at Hua Hin the following day, where Captain Bisdar was to meet us and where we were to stay in Prince Chula's house. But the car was not due for forty-eight hours and our two officials were of one mind in saying that it was quite impossible for it to arrive at the time the station-master said, as there was no train. I was inclined to rely on the station-master who had promised to get it there. Anyhow, whilst we were still discussing this a car arrived to take us to the local Fisheries Statistical Station at Klong Wan, a few miles outside the town.

This was another indication of how things had been arranged for us, not only here but throughout Thailand. In this case the Governor of the province was away, but various officials had been warned to expect us and to help and Captain Surachit and Nath On Yon took their duties very seriously. The Police Captain took some time to get used to us. He was rather nervous and was obviously impressed by the fact that we had been vouched for by one of his royal Princes. Nath On Yon, on the other hand, was full of smiles and good fellowship, bubbling over with conversation, of which we understood hardly a word. From time to time we had to appeal to Captain Surachit to tell us what Nath On Yon was saying, and as he got more used to us he began to smile and quite invariably supplied the wanted word, so that it was not long before he was referred to as "The Dictionary". I am not sure whether he liked it or not, but we certainly liked him and his companion.

The Fisheries Statistical Station is situated on a series of inlets from the sea. Large tanks have been constructed and there fish of all sorts are bred and shipped, whilst quite small,

to other parts of the country. Fish play an enormously important part in the life of the Thai people. As we were to discover later, half the population seems to spend most of its time fishing in all sorts of muddy pools and swampy streams. The variety of ways of catching fish is enormous.

Here, at Klong Wan, we were introduced to what was to become one of our standbys—Green Spot. Green Spot is simply orangeade served ice-cold, but everywhere we went, as soon as we entered a house, our host would produce Green Spot or alternatively "Biley", the local pronunciation for another variety of orangeade, properly spelt, I think, Birley. It was one of the little difficulties to which we had to become accustomed that, although so many Thai people spoke a fair amount of English, they had the Chinese custom of pronouncing an "R" like and "L". For example, when we were given a road direction to turn right we were always told to go to the "Light", but when we had to go to the left we were told to turn "Reft". On the signposts a right turn is indicated by a sign exactly the same as our letter "L". It is all rather confusing until one gets used to it, but also it is amazing the number of people, particularly young people, who speak some English. Education is compulsory and in the secondary schools and universities English is an important subject and in fact much of the teaching is done in English. Unfortunately, but quite naturally, the teachers themselves are Thais, frequently of Chinese descent and, in consequence, the spoken word is sometimes not very much like the Queen's English. As we could not always understand the spoken English of the Thais, so the Thais had exactly the same difficulty in understanding English spoken as by us. It usually took at least a day and sometimes longer before the various people with whom we came in contact could understand us, but in cases of necessity we could always write our question and receive a written reply in perfectly good English. It was simply the pronunciation which puzzled both sides.

By the time we left the fisheries station Captain Surachit, Nath On Yon, the fisheries official and ourselves were talking together nearly normally as we bumped our way over

rather a rough road back to Prachuap, in order to have lunch and continue our discussion about our car.

All sorts of things had been going on since our arrival, quite unknown to us. Telegraph or telephone wires had been buzzing and we were eventually told that after lunch a car would be available to take us straight to Hua Hin where Captain Bisdar would meet us. As to our car, "Well, never mind, it will come some time."

"But where, as well as when?" I asked.

"Of course it will come here as you have arranged that."

"But if we are going on to Hua Hin how can we get our car?" I rather naturally asked.

"Oh, never mind, that will be arranged." ("Never mind" was an expression we were to hear often in Thailand.)

With that I had to be content for the time being and we settled down to an enormous meal. On the table was an array of slices of cold beef and salad, fried local oysters, hot steak and onions and boiled fowl, which was followed by frozen lichees (a local fruit looking like a small white radish with a sweet flavour peculiarly its own), and hot coffee. We tried to sample everything but simply could not manage the lot, to the great disappointment of our hosts. And when we thought we had finished, boiled rice and curry arrived.

Incidentally, southern Thailand is supposed to be the worst part of the whole country for infected food and water. There are said to be more germs and diseases here than in any other part and we had been advised and warned by all our well-wishers both in England and in Malaya not on any account to drink the water, here or elsewhere, or eat lettuce or the majority of the foods that we should find put before us. In fact, as I have already said, one man told us we must live on bottled beer and eggs! We had to start by breaking every one of these canons. Without being deliberately rude, it would have been impossible to avoid eating and drinking the forbidden things, and this we continued to do throughout our stay in Thailand. We were living with Thais and naturally lived as they did—and were none the worse for it.

Lunch over, our baggage, ourselves and the two officers,



together with the driver, piled into a tender and arrived at Hua Hin one hour and fifty minutes later. The road was surfaced with gravel, generally in fairly good condition. We bumped along at forty miles an hour most of the time amidst clouds of dust and I began to think that if the roads were no worse than this we should have no difficulty with our journey. I was an optimist.

The scenery in this spot was uninteresting, flattish country with hills to the right and left in the distance. Clumps of bamboo and low undergrowth fringed the roads. Occasionally a cluster of kapok trees broke the monotony.

Captain Bisdar was awaiting us at Prince Chula's house at Hua Hin and immediately we all got down to a discussion about the car. The talk went on for a very considerable time. It was generally agreed by all our Thai friends that the station-master at Pedang Besar was quite wrong and that the car could not arrive at Prachuap as he had promised. I still thought he probably knew his own job best and suggested that when it arrived at Prachuap it should be sent straight on to Hua Hin where we should stay until it arrived. R. and I were very much influenced in this connection by realizing what an extremely pleasant place we had to stay in, and the older we get the more we like our comfort! We seem to spend so much of time seeking discomfort in odd parts of the world! However, we were over-ruled and it was finally decided that we should stay at Hua Hin for the night and the following day go on to Bangkok in Captain Bisdar's car, leaving our car to continue its rail journey all the way to Bangkok where it was confidently predicted it would arrive in about ten day's time. As this would upset the programme very carefully arranged for us by Thai officials, I received the news rather glumly I am afraid, but agreed to the suggestion. We said goodbye to Captain Surachit and Nath On Yon, who returned to Prachuap, and settled down to enjoy our evening at Hua Hin.

Now is a suitable time to state that the station-master at Pedang Besar was quite right and all our local advisers were completely wrong. The car arrived at Prachuap as promised

by the station-master and then, by the intervention of the Governor, who had returned, it was sent straight through to Bangkok, arriving there the day after we did.

Actually this made very little difference to our arrangements as we motored all the way from Prachuap to Bangkok, though we did not use our own car. In any case, this part of the journey was over perfectly good roads through comparatively uninteresting country and we were able to stop and see the places of interest which I write about later. Anyhow we gave full marks to the station-master at Pedang Besar.



## *Chapter Two*

### *Hua Hin to Bangkok*

THROUGHOUT this book I shall from time to time put in odd pieces of information which came to our ears—things to do with local manners, behaviour, habits and history. It seems to me that it is more interesting to recount them as they happened and as they came to us than to assemble a formal chapter headed "Habits of the People" or some such thing.

At Hua Hin, the first place where we really stretched our legs, many impressions were forced on us. First of all Prince Chula's house at Hua Hin, where before dinner R. was in the bathroom adjoining our bedroom. She called out to me.

"Can you tell me how I have a bath?"

Of course I went in to see and found a large room with a beautifully tiled floor, a fitted basin but no sign whatsoever of a bath. In the corner was an enormous and most lovely china vase supported in a three-legged frame of teak and by it a beautifully chased silver bowl about the size of a tea slop-basin. I have lived in the East and am accustomed to its ways, but this was R.'s first visit east of Aden, and when I suggested that she stood by the vase, dipped the basin into the water and poured it over herself she was somewhat surprised, but as the days went by and we found this the almost invariable form of bath in Thailand she not only got accustomed to the method but grew to like it. On a hot day to be able to stand pouring bowls of cool water over one's sweaty body is one of the most delightful things I know, certainly far better than lying in a bath of cold water.

Then, of course, the taking of snuff interested me. It is a habit I have indulged in for many years, but the gardener at Hua Hin took his in a way entirely new to me. I take my snuff

in a pinch between finger and thumb; I am quite used to seeing Africans use a tiny spoon to thrust the powder into their nostrils; but I have never before seen a man take a small silver tube curved like a horseshoe, fill one end of it with snuff, place the other end in his mouth and puff the powder up his nostrils.

In the garden of this very pleasant house, a bungalow built on piles, like practically all country houses in Thailand, there is a small spirit-house, a tiny model of a building, not unlike a doll's-house, placed on top of a pole for the use of the spirits who may have been disturbed when the house itself was built. A pretty habit which we found common throughout Thailand. In fact, from time to time we saw small factories with large supplies of these spirit-houses available for people who were building themselves new residences. Sometimes on a dangerous corner of the road there would be one or more of these little houses erected to encourage the good spirits to dwell there and so prevent accidents, or possibly to placate the evil spirits by giving them a nice residence and so inducing them not to cause crashes. Animism plays quite a large part in the life and religion of the Thais, though they are nominally Buddhists.

Adjoining the garden is the fishing village of Hua Hin, a jumble of boats in the water and piled up on the sand; new ships under construction; a forest of poles for drying fishing-nets and under it all hundreds of chickens and many hollow-backed, hairy pigs. These pigs wander about the streets and act as general scavengers.

As it was the time of the Chinese New Year people were busy in their open-fronted houses preparing cakes which they wrapped in pieces of banana leaf, cooking ducks and generally arranging foodstuffs of all sorts which would be taken as an offering to the temple to be blessed, after which the food would be eaten by the household. Hand-trucks, samlohs and conveyances of all sorts were moving about the village taking these foodstuffs to the temple or returning to the houses. We looked eagerly for Siamese cats, but not only did we not find any of this breed, but we didn't see a cat at all—a strange

thing in a fishing village. Away from the old village spreads the modern part of Hua Hin, with wide streets and shops of all sorts selling gaily coloured and decorated merchandise, fancy hats and streamers, brightly coloured paper umbrellas and flags, all things to help in the jollification of a popular holiday. Chinese New Year lasts a week and during this period not only the Chinese but practically all other people take the opportunity to stop work and generally hold up all affairs, except feasting and jollity, until the New Year is well aired.

We slept that night in an enormous double-bed, nearly six feet wide, enclosed in a cage of softly draped mosquito nets. On the bed was a blanket and two dutch wives. For the benefit of those who do not know I would say that a dutch wife is a small bolster which is most useful to place between the legs or serve as a resting place for the knees in hot weather. It acts in exactly the opposite way to an English wife, one of whose duties is supposed to be to keep her husband warm in winter! The dutch wife keeps him cool in summer.

And whilst speaking of beds, I would say that Thai beds are just about the hardest resting places I have ever encountered. The average bedstead consists of a normal wooden frame completely covered with solid boards, on top of which is placed a very thin palliase. There are no bed-clothes as a rule though sometimes a blanket is provided, particularly in the cooler northern regions. The climate does not make bed-covers necessary, and doubtless the unyielding nature of the bed does tend to keep one cooler—but it needs an awful lot of getting used to. I wonder why they do not use something like the Indian charpoy, a frame strung with strips of rawhide, very cool and slightly yielding. The Hua Hin bed was not like this and we slept comfortably, to be aroused early in the morning by the sound of rifle-shots and volleys apparently being fired in our immediate neighbourhood. With our heads full of Communism, the first thought was that a revolution, or rioting at least, had broken out. Then we realized that it was simply part of the celebrations of the Chinese New Year. People were letting off crackers and large explosive fireworks as part of the general ceremonies of the time.



We got up and went out into the garden, looking at the many different varieties of bougainvillea and watching the gardener draw water from the well with a bucket on the end of a counter-weighted pole, whilst prettily coloured butterflies, six inches in span, fluttered about in the flowering shrubs. The white breakers from the blue waters of the Gulf of Siam (Yes! Siam) broke on the sands at the foot of the garden wall. As we walked we met the policeman who, carbine on back, had patrolled the grounds round the house throughout the night whilst we slept.

Of course in these very early days we were anxious to find out how we should behave; what was the right kind of greeting to make; what we should do at table. Apparently greetings are highly complex affairs. Normally Thais do not shake hands, but two friends meeting will place their hands together in front of them, as though in prayer, and raise them roughly to the level of the chin whilst bowing slightly. But the position of the hands and the depth of the bow varies according to the importance of the person met. In writing, forms of address are equally ceremonious. An ordinary person writing to a prince would start his letter, or indeed when speaking to him, by saying something like: "My head addresses the soles of your feet." Similarly equals, speaking among themselves will say "Yes" and "No", but speaking to a superior they are much more circumspect. With table manners I have never quite fathomed what one should do. Generally at a meal a small bowl of soup and a china spoon is placed beside each person. There may be a large bowl of the same soup in the middle of the table for replenishments, sometimes kept warm by a hollow tube filled with glowing charcoal running through the centre of the soup bowl. On the table are scattered dishes containing vegetables, duck chopped into pieces, bits of meat and all sorts of unusual kinds of food. You just help yourself to a little of this and a little of that, piling them all on your plate at the same time and eating the food with a spoon and fork, interspersing mouthfuls with spoonfuls of soup. Sometimes a simple sweet, usually fruit, finishes the meal. Green Spot,

possibly Coco Cola (always called Cola) or soda-water is generally provided for drinking. Ordinary tap water is sometimes available but people still frequently remember the susceptibilities of foreign guests and usually provide bottled soda water. Often, too, wine or beer will be provided and frequently Thai tea—very weak tea of an indescribably refreshing flavour served without milk or sugar. In sophisticated households sherry or cocktails may be served before a meal, but, generally speaking, in Thailand intoxicants of any sort are not provided, it being one of the tenets of the Buddhist religion that alcohol should be avoided or at any rate drunk only in extreme moderation.

A working man accepting a gift will generally either cup his two hands together or hold out one hand with his other hand grasping his wrist, to receive the gift. Bare feet are customary and, in fact, many people in high positions, though wearing sandals as they move about outside, will frequently kick them off as soon as they enter a house. It needed a little getting used to to be received by the Governor and his lady, he in socks and she probably in bare feet. At Hua Hin, at the foot of the steps running from the verandas of the house to the garden, small foot-baths are provided so that gardeners or other servants coming into the house can wash the earth off their feet before ascending the steps, to avoid bringing the dirt on to the beautifully polished floors of the verandas and rooms.

We left Hua Hin after breakfast, Captain Bisdar driving us in his American car. The first stop was to be at Petchburi, but I am afraid we caused him some perturbation by frequent requests to pause whilst we photographed what were to him the ordinary things of the countryside, hardly worth a glance, but which to us were new and interesting. I found he was worried because he had made arrangements to call on the Governor of Petchburi and was afraid we should be late.

The road was excellent, fringed by clumps of bamboo, undergrowth and thickets of ton palm trees. Irrigation canals frequently crossed the road and over these were

wooden bridges with some top timbers lying parallel to the direction of the road, thus providing a rather narrow track on which the wheels of the car could run. The banging of traffic gradually loosens the nails by which these planks are fastened, and it is no uncommon thing to pass over a bridge with many spikes projecting a couple of inches above the surface. It is impossible to dodge them all, and punctures in consequence are frequent.

Once we asked Captain Bisdar to stop whilst we watched men collecting the sap of the ton palms. From this sap sugar is made, equal in quality in every way to that produced from the sugar cane grown in other parts of the country. These sugar palms have fixed against their tall trunks, to a height of possibly fifty feet or more, tall bamboos from which the side-shoots have been cut, leaving projections about four inches long. The bamboos are bound to the trunk of the palm tree by fibres and so, one after another, go right to the crown of the tree. This enables the men to run up and down the palms with ease, the slight projections of the bamboos affording them the necessary toe-holds. At the top they collect the sap bringing it down in jars to be boiled for the production of sugar. Though we saw hundreds of these trees during this drive with Captain Bisdar, only once more throughout the whole of Thailand did we see them growing. As is the case with the sugar cane, a by-product is toddy, forbidden but enticing. Our appearance with ciné cameras and ordinary cameras and Bisdar's encouragement to the men to run up and down the palms for our benefit whilst we took photographs, produced shrieks of laughter from them and their womenfolk. Children and other men came out of the surrounding undergrowth, looking at us with interest and yelling with mirth as we took pictures of the climbers running up and down the tree trunks like monkeys. One shouted remark, translated by Bisdar—"I shall go abroad at last—in my picture."

In due course we reached Petchburi and called on the Governor, Nai Kasem Sukun, who sent us off with an alarmingly large escort of armed police to visit the palace of



King Mongkut, the monarch who has become so well-known to western people in the film "Anna and the King of Siam".

The palace of King Mongkut is built on a hill outside the town. At the entrance is a stone seven-headed serpent, but from this point we had to scramble up many ruined steps, and steep rocky paths to the palace itself, on the way passing the old guard-room and stables and hall where distinguished visitors were first greeted.

King Mongkut is quite possibly the best known in England and the U.S.A. of all the Thai kings, owing to the film and play which give such a picturesque but erroneous idea of his life and times. He was born in 1804 and became king in 1851. Quite apart from the celebrity cast on him by the glamour of the movies he was a great and wise king in his own country, whose reign is still remembered as one of the great periods in modern Thai history. The palace was built in the middle of the nineteenth century but has now been allowed to fall into decay. It was with a feeling of desolation and sadness that we walked through the rooms previously occupied by this monarch and noted the frayed and broken furniture still lying about in untidy piles and doing little to remind one of the beauty and grandeur that must have been here in the past. There was a four-poster bed said to have been used by the king, its draperies mouldering in decayed strips, whilst nearby lay the broken remains of the seven-tier umbrella used by the crown-prince—a framework of cane with the fabric entirely gone. Of the king's nine-tier umbrella there was no trace though we were told it probably lay in one of the piles of rubbish lumbering up the rooms.

State umbrellas are still used in royal ceremonies. At his coronation and on other important occasions the king sits under a nine-tier umbrella—usually of gold cloth. The lowest tier is a wide one and the layers are gradually reduced in size until, at the top, the last layer is only about a foot wide. The whole effect is a cone supported by a pole. The umbrella of a Crown Prince only has seven tiers and princes of lesser importance have smaller umbrellas.

From terrace to terrace we wandered, walking through rooms, some empty, some partially furnished, leaning on the warm marble walls to look over the frangipani trees in full blossom and sending out waves of beautiful scent, whilst we gazed over the spreading country hundreds of feet below. On a nearby hill was an old wat or temple and on the outskirts of the town itself could be seen the large palace built by King Chulalongkork, perhaps the most famous king of the present Chakri dynasty.

And so we came to the room, half chamber, half temple, which contains a wooden statue of King Mongkut himself. The statue shows an elderly, thin man with a benevolent and thoughtful expression worn by the cares of state.

It is customary for visitors to show their reverence for any particular statue, particularly of the Buddha, by placing on it small pieces of gold leaf. This had been done by thousands of people in the case of King Mongkut's statue. Naturally the gold leaf, amateurishly applied, did not adhere firmly to the body; the edges were loose and became frayed in the course of time.

When we were shown the statue, in a darkened room, the window shutters at either side were opened and the sun streamed in, lighting up the gold tissue, whilst the breeze caused the frayed edges to move so that the whole statue seemed to shimmer and be surrounded by an ambient, trembling light. The image seemed to come to life as we gazed at it. Our companions knelt in homage whilst we stood reverently by. Then we clambered down the steep path again in the hot sunshine and were thankful to sit down to the lunch which the Governor had provided.

I must be forgiven if I talk a lot about meals in this book. I was criticized for referring so much to food and sanitation in my book *The Pampas and the Andes*, but in writing about a country as one sees it I think that the unusual is bound to play a large part, and Thai meals, to western ideas, are certainly unusual. Our lunch that day was taken in a Chinese restaurant. We had soup (of course in a bowl for each person, to be eaten as the meal proceeded) and though this soup



itself consisted mostly of solid chicken meat the table was also spread with slices of sausage made from shrimps, pork and crab; with cucumber; with prawns and vegetables; and then, when we were happy and replete, an enormous pile of rice with shredded pieces of meat arrived to round off the meal. Chopsticks were handed to us. R. and I looked at one another and out of the corner of our eyes we noticed our hosts smiling kindly at what they thought was our predicament. But we have used chopsticks before and, though clumsy, were able to eat our meal in the approved style. Then our hosts laughed openly and congratulated us, at the same time explaining that Thais themselves never use chopsticks but always a spoon and fork and that chopsticks are only provided in restaurants run by people of Chinese descent or in Thai households of Chinese antecedents.

I do not know the exact proportion but a very large percentage of Thais are Chinese in origin and of course it must be borne in mind that the present Thai race came from Yunnan in what is now Southern China. Anyhow, as far as we could find out the Chinese Thais are a useful, hard-working and honest part of the community.

Of course with our meal we drank Green Spot and at intervals during this hot day—the temperature was about 90° F. in the shade—we stopped frequently to drink more of this orange juice, out of the bottle through a straw.

We left Petchburi with its teeming streets, colourful shops and myriads of bicycles after lunch to visit the caves of Tham Khao Luang a few miles away. We scrambled down the usual rough steps to a series of enormous caverns with stalactites hanging from the ceiling and stalagmites rising from the floor to meet them. On top of most of the stalagmites and on many shelves and projections in the sides of the caverns were statues of Buddha. In one corner were some tables behind which sat, cross-legged on benches, three elderly nuns in their white robes, selling gold-leaf and joss-sticks for the use of the devout visitors. I asked them if I might take a photograph and they gladly assented, but these elderly ladies, devoted to a life of asceticism and religion,

asked me to wait a moment whilst they tidied themselves up. They rearranged their robes, smoothed their shaven heads, arranged their arms in suitable postures and then indicated that I might make an exposure. It was all very childlike and in a way very touching. Incidentally, wherever we went, when we met Buddhist monks in their saffron robes or very rarely nuns in white, they were always friendly and helpful and quite willing to pose for us in appropriate places, all of it being done without any self-conscious air but with quiet dignity and usually a benevolent smile of interest for the curiosity of the western visitor.

A second cavern had an enormous statue of a reclining Buddha and, as a contrast, we were pointed out a jumble of rocks where an American had recently been stabbed. Apparently a robber, hiding in the recesses of the cave, had seen his camera and decided to snatch it from him. The American resisted and quite naturally attacked the robber with his fists, whereupon the latter drew a knife and stabbed his victim. Strangely enough, some weeks later, in Korat, I fell into conversation with a member of one of the American missions and he told me about the same incident, and said that as he was nearby he had been sent for and had rendered first-aid and taken his fellow American into hospital, where happily he recovered from his wound. We were warned by the police and various friends never to attempt physical violence against any Thai, whatever the provocation might be, as, although they are normally a quiet, good-tempered people, when insulted or attacked their temper flares up instantly and they are apt to use their knives or other weapons almost by reflex action. I could not visualize any occasion on which I was likely to apply brute force to a Thai, but nevertheless I bore the warning in mind.

From the caves of Tham Khao Luang we went to a nearby convent and monastery. The Abbot, Pra Krew Sapon Vajiratar, himself came out to talk with us. Bisdar explained to me that he was not allowed to look at a woman though he was quite happy in talking to me, of course through Bisdar's intermediary as interpreter. If R. spoke to

him he would reply but kept his eyes cast downwards so that he need not look at her. Here again, when I asked if I might take his photograph, he asked me to wait a moment and retired to the monastery from which he emerged shortly afterwards wearing fresh robes, beautifully draped in the correct manner.

By now, R. and I having climbed, it seemed, thousands of steps during the day, up and down to the palace of King Mongkut, down and up to the caves of Tham Khao Luang, up and down to the monastery and convent, were feeling that we had had a good day's sight-seeing, but our hosts were quite determined that we should miss nothing during our stay in Thailand. We were, however, allowed to stop for a few minutes at Rajburi to suck more bottles of the inevitable Green Spot. Whilst we were thus employed, Bisdar saw a friend dressed in the Thai style a short distance away. He brought him over and introduced him to us. Before his friend spoke I commented that so many of the Thais we met spoke good English that I expected he was able to use our language also.

"Well, *actually* I was with your Royal Navy for twelve years," replied our new friend. His accentuation of the word "*actually*" was so completely English that I am afraid R. and I roared with laughter at him. He looked astonished for a moment and then joined in our merriment and said,

"Yes, that surprised you a bit, I expect, when you see me dressed in these clothes."

He went on to tell me about the British ships in which he had served and also about his experiences during the Korean war. Commander Utai has now retired, but if any of his British naval friends should read this book they may like to hear that he is well and flourishing as a prominent business man.

We stopped at Nakorn Pathom, once more being greeted by the governor's staff before visiting the immense pagoda some 375 feet high—nearly as high as the spire of Salisbury Cathedral. Officially known as the Phra Pathom Chedi, the pagoda dates from about A.D. 500 but since then has been



restored and repaired and over-built many times. During the reign of King Mongkut orders were given to clear away the jungle which had surrounded and overgrown the chedi and encase it within an enormous bell-shaped structure, which is the present shape. The original buildings were not destroyed or removed and exist, as they were originally constructed, beneath the modern covering. This is not only the largest monument of its kind in Thailand but one of the holiest spots in the country, for within the precincts of the sanctuary there are many Buddhist relics regarded with great reverence by the Thais and being of interest to tourists. Outside the chedi are four chapels housing four images of Buddha in different attitudes, one being placed at each of the cardinal points of the compass. They are connected by a circular gallery and in the various courts outside are different trees connected with the life of Buddha—bo trees and banyans. In colour the chedi is brown and yellow and shines in the sun as though gilded, for the outer covering is made of highly glazed tiles.

Leading to the northern chapel is a great marble staircase at the head of which is a tremendous gilt image of the Buddha, placed there by King Vajiravudh. Apart from the beauty of this image it is interesting inasmuch as the head came from the old city of Suwankalok. The body was cast anew in the correct proportion for the head. King Vajiravudh wished that his ashes might be put in the pedestal of this image after his death and this was duly done.

It is a royal tradition that whenever the reigning king passes the Phra Pathom Chedi he must offer candles and joss-sticks in veneration of the Buddha.

At this pagoda is another reclining Buddha some fifty feet long. Later I will try to give some account of the various Buddha statues found not only in Thailand but in other countries which have the same faith, for the position of the image and particularly the position of the hands have different meanings, all complicated to the uninitiated but necessary to understand when looking at the thousands of Buddhas which are bound to be seen up and down the country.



Outside the chedi are two bells which can be rung by visitors in order to obtain a blessing or to announce that they are about to offer up a prayer, and round about are quantities of carved images of fabulous beasts, devils and dwarfs carved in stone, all, strange as it may seem, coming from China. These carvings may be found in temples all over the country, in Chinese work and very different to the Thai style. Their origin is a very mundane one. Ships trading from Thailand to China in the old days frequently came back without full cargoes and needed ballast to make them seaworthy. The Chinese, apparently having a surplus of devils, weird beasts and deformed stone men, used to supply these as ballast for the ships and so they came to be used in buildings all over Thailand.

Our sightseeing for the day was finished—at last, though this was only a foretaste of what was to come. On many days we went to bed weary and almost staggering from fatigue after climbing up and down steps and hillpaths, stumbling over great blocks of stone and mounting staircases in ruined buildings. Thailand is full of ruins, some of which are beautiful in their decay, though others are simply jumbles of stones covering vast areas of land, of no interest to foreigners except archaeologists or historians. Naturally the Thais take great pride in these ancient remains, and it is right and proper that they should do so.

And so at last we came to Bangkok. As the sun's heat began to decline the countryside became more active. Lumbering water-buffaloes plodded along the roads after their day's work. Others rolled in luxury in mud up to the ears or cooled themselves in pools and klongs after the heat of the day. Small boys sometimes sat on their broad backs kicking their heels into the ribs of the great beasts which, with their enormous spread of terrible horns, looked dangerous to a degree but which were in fact as quiet as the domestic cattle of England. Ducks literally covered the pools with their quacking bodies, heads disappearing under water, sterns waving in the air as they sought their evening food. Small canoes filled with rice were pushed along the muddy ditches.

In less used spots pink and white lotuses and water-lilies starred the water.

Abruptly, it seemed, we came to Bangkok, through the busy streets of Thonburi, one of the several old capitals of the country, over the river Chao Phya into the city. Suddenly we came from the quiet of the countryside into the glare of lights and the blare of loudspeakers, shouting, yelling and thundering out tunes and speeches in Thai, Chinese and American. Everywhere bicycles and samlohs wove their way frantically in and out of the traffic, disregarding trams and cars, which in their turn added their clatter and the hooting of horns to the general noise. Our first impressions of the main streets of Bangkok were of a seething ant's nest of humanity weaving in and out and jostling, running hither and thither with no apparent purpose.

"Have I got to drive the car in this?" demanded R.

"We shall have to try," said I. "Anyhow I don't think it's as bad as Rio or São Paulo."

We came to the Oriental Hotel on the banks of the river and bundled our baggage out of the car. But there was no room for us. Although accommodation had been booked, through a misunderstanding over possible delays in the time of our arrival someone had cancelled our booking. Once more Bisdar took us through the seething mass of population, noise and vehicles to the Ratanakosin Hotel on the other side of the city and there we were left to settle ourselves in and await the arrival of our car.

### *Chapter Three*

## *A Very Brief History of Thailand*

HAVING arrived at Bangkok, the present capital of Thailand, it is perhaps appropriate and indeed necessary for any understanding at all of the country, that I should give a very brief outline of its origins and history.

The earliest people of which there is any real knowledge who dwelt in this part of Asia were the Khmers, but what little is known about them is merely legend and the stories handed down from one generation to another have been embellished as time went on.

At this period the Thais were a people who, originating in Mongolia, had gradually moved southwards through the centuries until they occupied what is now the province of Yunnan in Southern China. Hearing reports of the wonderful fertility of the land over the mountains to the south, these Thais moved into the northern part of what is now Thailand and founded their capital of Sukhothai, which remained the capital of the north until about A.D. 1238. It is a pleasant thought to realize that the word Sukhothai means, according to Prince Chula,\* "Happy Thai", for the people of the country to-day are most certainly happy Thais—indeed one of the happiest and most cheerful people I have ever encountered.

Needless to say, war, invasion and conquest made up the history of these early days. Some say the people from Laos who, again according to Prince Chula, who has studied the history of his country deeply, may have been the original Thais, or the armies of Cambodia invaded Thailand and occupied it. Sometimes Cambodia came under the sway of

\* In his book *An Eastern Prince Came West*.





6. The Emerald Buddha in "wet season" robes





7. Houses beside a Bangkok klong or canal



8. Fishing in a shallow klong (outside Bangkok)

the Thais. The Cambodians have certainly left their mark in the country in the large number of enormous temples and palaces found throughout the land. These buildings are generally of stone, whereas I noticed that most of the temples and buildings attributed to the Thais themselves were of brick construction plastered over.

As time progressed and after the capital had moved to Ayuthya, the most frequent wars were with the Burmese who repeatedly invaded the country on one pretext or another, the most amusing being caused by the demand of the Burmese king for a share in the white elephants which had been amassed by the King of Thailand. This was in the middle of the sixteenth century and I should like to quote Prince Ghula\* to whom I am greatly indebted for much of my information regarding the history of his country:

"I have already said that with Buddhism there still existed Brahmanism side by side, especially in royal circles. According to that faith, for a monarch to be in possession of one or more white elephants was a sign of great good fortune. Anyone who found a white elephant anywhere in the kingdom had to present it to the sovereign, for to keep it was treason. These animals, of course, were not white; and in Thai we do not call them white but albino. They have white eyes and nails, white hair, and patches of pink usually on the head, trunk and forelegs. They were kept rather as pets and never used for any work. They were regarded as sacred appendages to the King's majesty, but were not worshipped for themselves. King Maha Chakrapat's reign promised to be most auspicious for one white elephant after another was found and he soon possessed the unprecedented number of seven. This number, believed by many to be lucky, proved the opposite for Maha Chakrapat and Thailand, for these seven white elephants were to drag the country into a war which was to last intermittently for twenty years.

"Up till then war between Thailand and Burma, our neighbour in the west, despite the intervention of Portuguese gunners, was almost in the nature of skirmishes. The real

\* In his book *An Eastern Prince Came West*.

war which now began had as the official cause the jealousy of King Tabeng Schweti of Burma, who had no white elephants, while Maha Chakrapat had seven. When the Burmese King asked for two, and later four, of these emblems of greatness, Maha Chakrapat politely but firmly refused. Tabeng Schweti invaded Thailand with a vast army and reached the walls of Ayuthya without difficulty as the Thais had concentrated on its defence. Sorties were made from the city, one led by Maha Chakrapat himself, sitting on the neck of his elephant, as generals did in those days. His queen, Suriyothai, accompanied him on another elephant disguised as a man. When the King was involved in single combat with a Burmese leader and seemed to be in mortal danger, the Queen drove her elephant in between and herself received the fatal blow. She has ever since been considered one of the heroines in our history."

Wars and tragedies in every country have frequently been caused by the smallest incident but this war is surely unique and might be termed "The War of the White Elephants".

In due course more of the Thais moved further south and established the kingdom of Southern Thailand with their capital at Ayuthya in A.D. 1350. Soon afterwards Northern and Southern Thailand became united and Ayuthya remained the capital of the united kingdom for 417 years, though, during this period, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, King Narai established a second capital at Lopburi, partly as a summer residence and partly as a place to which to retire, should Ayuthya fall into the hands of the enemy. It was not until A.D. 1767 that the Burmese, who had repeatedly and unsuccessfully invaded the country, succeeded in capturing Ayuthya after a long siege. They then entirely destroyed the city and killed, captured or dispersed the inhabitants so that the population of the place fell from about a million to less than ten thousand people. Nowadays the ruins, which have never been rebuilt, lie scattered over an area estimated at about forty square miles.

After the fall of Ayuthya the capital was moved to Thonburi on the western bank of the river Chao Phraya, but when



the present Chakri dynasty came into power King Rama the First moved the capital across the river to its present site, Bangkok, which has various alternative names and is known to many people as Krungdep. Indeed, I was assured when we were leaving Bangkok to continue our tour of the country, that if I had occasion to ask for the road back to the capital I must use the word Krungdep, as the country people would not know where I meant if I asked for Bangkok.

It was with the coming into power of the present Chakri dynasty that the modern history of Thailand may be said to begin. General Chakri, who was elected king by the people in 1782, when his predecessor was officially executed by being hit on the back of the neck with a sandalwood axe so that the royal blood should not be spilt (normal execution was chopping off the head with a sword), took the title of Rama and all his successors have borne the same name. This may help to dispel some of the confusion invariably and inevitably found in the minds of visitors like myself, who hear Thais talking in one breath of King Mongkut and in another of Rama the Fourth, who was obviously king at the same time as Mongkut. In order to sort out this difficulty I give a list of the kings of the Chakri dynasty:

Rama the First (General Chakri), 1782-1809.

Rama the Second (Isarasuntor), 1809-1824.

Rama the Third (Chesda or Nangklae—"The King who sits over our Heads" the title which is still applied by members of the Royal Family to the reigning King), 1824-1851.

Rama the Fourth (Mongkut—the hero of "Anna and the King of Siam"), 1851-1868.

Rama the Fifth (Chulalongkorn—possibly the greatest of the Chakri dynasty so far), 1868-1910.

Rama the Sixth (Vajiravudh), 1910-1925.

Rama the Seventh (Prajadhipok—abdicated), 1925-1935.

Rama the Eighth (Ananda Mahidol—murdered), 1935-1946.

Rama the Ninth (Bhumiphol Adundej), 1946-



The spelling of Thai names, whether of persons or towns, presents great difficulty to Europeans. Whilst our alphabet is blessed with a bare twenty-six letters with five vowels, the Thai alphabet has no fewer than forty-four consonants, thirty vowels and, in addition, five tones. The consequence is that though Thais can clearly distinguish minute differences in pronunciation, many of these are quite inaudible to most western ears. Owing to the different tones the same word pronounced with a high, low or medium inflexion may have three entirely different, and indeed quite different meanings. A glance at two or three of the very poor maps of the country which are the only ones available, will show a number of different westernized spellings of the same place name. A couple of examples—Mukedehan, Mukedan, Mukedehara, or simply Muk; Umnat Charoon is sometimes shown as Bung. And so, of course with the names of people. The name of the reigning king, His Majesty Rama the Ninth, is usually printed as King Bhumiphol Adundej, but by western tongues the name is pronounced "Poomipon". The letters "L" and "N" seem to me to be pronounced alike. Thus the town and province of Ubol is pronounced Ubon. This is all most confusing to the western visitor, but not nearly so confusing as the Thai script which derives from Sanskrit, as does the language, and it is this inability to transliterate the Sanskrit writing into the European script that is, of course, responsible for a large number of difficulties. Later we, of course, had much trouble in enquiring our way about the countryside through our complete inability to pronounce the names of the towns or villages for which we were seeking, in a way which was understood by the local people, though frequently if we wrote the name in western characters it could be read by many Thais who with roars of good-natured laughter at our ignorance, told us the correct pronunciation. From time to time in this book I shall mention little difficulties of language which cropped up, such as the polite officer who wished to draw our attention to a very handsome fowl beside the road and called it a "boxing hen". He went on chuckling to himself for several days when we laughed at this version

of the fighting cock and explained it to him. He could be heard muttering to himself and chuckling as he repeated "fighting cock, not boxing hen".

The same police officer pointed out to us a crop growing beside the road and said it was "Virginia". "Tobacco" we corrected and explained the difference between Virginia, Turkish, Rhodesian and other tobaccos. He roared with laughter at our explanation and, on finally saying "Good-bye" to us said, with a chuckle, "Tobacco not Virginia". We never understood the joke!

Recent Thai history shows a change in the government of the country. Until 1932 the monarchy of Thailand was absolute. In this year a *coup d'état* organized by a group of army, navy and civilian leaders headed by Colonel Phya Pahon Ponpayuha Sena took place and a provisional government was set up, the leaders pledging themselves to adhere to the principles of (i) independence; (ii) internal peace; (iii) economic stability; (iv) equality; (v) freedom; and (vi) education. This new regime was organized under an executive council and senate. A retired Chief Justice of the Appeal Court, Phya Manopakorn Nitithada became Chairman of the Executive Committee, or Premier. The Provisional Constitution was signed by His Majesty King Prajadhipok on the 27th June and on the 19th December 1932.

A year later Colonel, now General Phya Pahon Ponpayuha Sena found himself in disagreement with the Premier, as Phya Manopakorn Nitithada had extreme conservative ideals and had established what amounted to a mild form of dictatorship, tending to the return of the absolute monarchy. The result was another *coup d'état* and on 21st June 1933, General Phya Pahon Ponpayuha Sena was appointed Premier. He was re-appointed Premier four consecutive times from 1933 to 1938 and finally died in 1947. His governments were democratic and consequently strange to the ideas of the country and during the early days of his government certain people, who were adversely affected by the new ideals, rebelled and attacked Bangkok on 12th October

1933, with a view to gaining control of the administration. After a four-day battle the rebels were defeated.

The change in government and various disturbances obviously affected the King, who retired to England and finally abdicated on the 2nd March 1935. He was succeeded by Prince Mahidol, at that time a schoolboy in Switzerland, and a Council of Regency was appointed to govern the country, General Phya Pahon Ponpayuha Sena remaining Premier. He was succeeded as Premier in 1938 by Field-Marshal Pibul Songkhram who, with several gaps, has been re-appointed from time to time and was Premier during our visit to Thailand.

The third *coup d'état* took place in November 1947, when officers of the army, navy and air force, with police and civil service officials seized control of the administrative buildings in Bangkok and effected a change of government authorities, dissolving Parliament and calling for a General Election of Members of the House of Representatives. The causes of this *coup d'état* were said to be government inefficiency and corruption which caused widespread distress and hardship.

Then in February 1949, occurred a rather curious incident culminating in a clash in Bangkok between the army and the navy, but this trouble petered out the following month.

Now the Constitution seems well established with a democratic form of government, not unlike our own, with three political parties under the Premiership of Field-Marshal Pibul Songkhram and with King Phumipon sitting on the throne.

Perhaps a word as to Thailand's position during the late war would not be out of place. In 1941 the virtually helpless country was overwhelmed by the Japanese, and under Japanese pressure Thailand was forced to declare war on Britain and the United States. Whilst the U.S.A. realized that Thailand was acting under duress, Great Britain recognized a state of war with Thailand though it was known that the Thai Government was acting under pressure and that



the Thai people were, as always, extremely pro-British. Indeed it was during the reign of Rama the Third, in the first half of the nineteenth century, that British advisers and instructors of many kinds were invited to help the Thai people in their progress towards modern western ideas, and Great Britain and British people have always had a very high place in the affections of the Thais.

I took occasion to ask Thais of many classes in different parts of the country how they were treated during the Japanese occupation of their country. As far as I can gather the occupation was a mild one, the people being allowed to live in their customary ways and carry out their usual avocations. From time to time pressure was applied to the government to provide vast sums of money required by the Japanese and this was of course reflected in the taxes applied to the people. There were a few atrocities but generally speaking the occupation passed off peacefully, though the Thais welcomed the British with open arms at the end of the war and the withdrawal of the Japanese.

Lately, Thailand has again become prominent in the eyes of the world owing to the SEATO Conference held in Bangkok in February 1955. At this conference the position of Thailand, a modern democratic country with a modern democratic king, surrounded by countries under the influence of communism, was clearly recognized and many of the nations of the world have pledged themselves to go to the help of Thailand in case of necessity.



## *Chapter Four*

### *The Beauties of Bangkok*

THE Ratanakosin Hotel in Bangkok has pretensions to being a modern hotel. We were given a very large bed-sitting room with bathroom adjoining. It was air-conditioned and at first sight appeared comfortable. For this we were charged the equivalent of nearly £8 a day, not including meals. Our first move was to shut off the air-conditioning which blew an icy blast into the chamber whilst the windows were tightly closed. For some reason the glass was opaque so that one could not see out (indeed I have noticed that most air-conditioned rooms have opaque glass in the windows, though why I cannot understand). Having switched off the icy blasts we opened the windows to let in some warm air, for Bangkok to us was no more than pleasantly warm at that time—somewhere about 85° F., a temperature certainly not calling for air-conditioning in a bedroom.

R. retired to the bathroom to remove the dust of our day's motoring. This room was large and tiled with a modern bath-tub fitted, though I was somewhat surprised to see that only the cold tap was connected, and this by means of a piece of garden hose-pipe, to the water-pipe on the wall. R. threw her clothes on the floor of the bathroom and was soon revelling in the cool water but a few minutes later I heard a yell and went to the bathroom to find her standing on the floor in a pool of water, her clothes and bath towel floating around her. Having finished her bath she had naturally pulled out the plug to let out the dirty water, but the plumbers had not connected this to an outlet pipe and the water flowed out over the floor, eventually soaking away through a small hole in the corner. Whether it trickled down

the outside of the building, or what happened to it, I do not know, but I do know I had an indignant wife who demanded a dry towel and sent for the room-boy to dry her "sopping" clothes. It seemed a pretty poor show at nearly £8 a day and quite unworthy of the nice building and pleasant staff who ministered to our needs.

The cocktail-bar was the equivalent of a refrigerator. Indeed, all the hotels in Bangkok seem to find it necessary to provide bars or dining-rooms with air-conditioning that reduces the temperature to such a degree as to make it dangerous, and when we had to use one of these rooms we always took the precaution of putting on woolly jackets to guard against the probable chill in coming from the warm atmosphere outside. I am sure that half the stomach troubles that people suffer from in Bangkok are simply chills, through the abrupt change of temperature caused by these icily cold air-conditioned rooms. Of course poor sanitation, bad water, diseased salad, bad fish, over-ripe fruit and various other things are blamed for the various illnesses, but I am sure one need not look much further than these air-conditioned rooms for the real causes of much sickness.

The dining-room was open to the air along one side—a pleasant room into which flew sparrows, who cheekily perched on the tables and almost on the heads of guests, begging for crumbs and quarrelling among themselves. We found them most fascinating. On the face of it, menus were generally a fair copy of the table d'hôte meals to be obtained in second-class hotels in Europe. The only difficulty was that the most interesting course was almost invariably "off" and an inferior substitute was provided. No, on the whole I did not think much of the Rat, and I would like to suggest to the directors that they should send their manager or manageress on a tour of some of the European or American hotels in order that they might run the Ratanakosin in the way in which one expects a first-class and expensive hotel to be run, or keep it purely as a good Thai hotel with no European pretensions. I believe I am correct in saying that at the time of our stay the lady who said she was the manageress had

previously been a midwife (or so she told us), surely rather a peculiar qualification for the management of a first-class hotel in the capital city of a country.

Incidentally we never saw a women staying in any hotel outside Bangkok, with the exception of a princess and her party who were making a semi-official visit.

Bisdar (I no longer called him "Captain" for we soon became on the friendliest of terms) had made many arrangements for us and the day after our arrival took us to the Royal Palace of Bangkok, where an official of the Royal Household, Cha Reng Nganradrud, took us round and gave us permission to take ciné films as well as still photographs, a privilege not normally extended to the visiting public.

I find it extremely difficult to describe the Palace. It is almost a walled city, covering an area of about a square mile and filled with marvellous buildings and temples of lovely and colourful architecture, decorated with beautiful carvings and inlaid porcelain and embellished with gigantic and brightly coloured devils, to guard the entrances. Stone lions and dragons and dwarfs and figures of all kinds stand in the courtyards.

The roofs of the buildings intrigued me considerably. The eaves sweep up in receding overlapping tiers, with green and red tiles climbing to the ridges and gables decorated with fabulous dragons and mythical beasts. Under the eaves of the temples hang tiny bells which tinkle in the breeze. Through open gates and delightful archways one glimpses ornate buildings and colonnades supported on gilt columns, whilst the spires of pagodas rise above the buildings and the green leaves of bo trees and banyans offer patches of grateful shade. Stone and marble paved courtyards surround the buildings and at each turn a fresh vista of beauty arises. The whole place is a maze of loveliness in which all the colours of the rainbow vie with the gilding of statues and columns. Porticos and lintels of carved stone or wood or porcelain, all gaily and beautifully coloured and exquisite in their detail, delight the eye at every turn. The whole place is a fantastic mass of beauty, beauty of design, beauty of colour and



beauty of sound through the faint sighing of the wind in the trees and the tinkling of the temple bells.

I hardly remember which buildings we visited and many of the details which we saw. I simply have a confused memory of more beauty than I have ever seen in such a small area before—a beauty which needs a week, a month or a year to study rather than a few hours which were largely taken up, anyhow, in obtaining photographs to recall the loveliness to our eyes after we had gone. I may say that R. and I had every intention of returning without our friendly guides and simply bathing ourselves in the light and colour of the palace, but things happened which prevented our carrying out this idea.

I shall not attempt to describe the various buildings one by one. In the first place, as I have said before, this is not a guide-book and in the second place my impressions, as I hope I have conveyed, are not at all clear as to detail; in my mind is the impression and memory of the great beauty of one of the rare spots that surpass imagination and more than fulfill anticipation; one of the places in the world which I want to revisit.

But certain things stand out. The wonderful hall of the Chakri Palace built in the Italian style after the plans of a British architect, with a glorious roof of pure Thai style and inside it the magnificent throne-hall, is an abiding memory, as is the lovely Dusit Maha Prasad, one of the jewels of modern Thai architecture, in which the King receives the ambassadors of foreign powers. The paintings of Thai monarchs and royalties were of tremendous interest to me. I do not think they can be called fine paintings but they did show the ceremonial and other costumes during the period of the Chakri dynasty. I want to visit them again and spend more time there. Then the Baisal Daksin where the coronation of the King takes place, with its wonderful throne and the gorgeous pavilions in which the King appears before the public on these occasions, stands out in my memory.

But the Wat Phra Keo, or Temple of the Emerald Buddha, is perhaps the jewel of the place and within it is the



most revered image of Buddha in the whole of Thailand. Outside the building, at three of the entrances, are pairs of huge demons covered with coloured glazed tiles. Inside, enthroned under a golden canopy near the top of a gorgeously decorated gilt altar, sits the Buddha known as the Phra Keo Morakot. This is not always open to the public and the impressiveness and beauty of the scene was all the more evident owing to our being the only people in this temple at the time when we saw it.

This, the Emerald Buddha, is not cut from an enormous emerald, as some people suppose, but has been carved from a single piece of flawless, translucent jasper. It is about two feet high and wears vestments and head-dresses of pure gold studded with jewels. These vestments are changed three times during the year, different garments being worn during the rainy, the cold and the hot seasons. The change of vestment is regarded as such an important and holy occasion that the King himself attends in order to carry out this ceremony. Normally the Buddha may not be photographed, but I am happy to be able to show a picture of the image in one of the costumes. Tradition says that the Buddha was carved by the King of the Gods for Nagasena, a famous religious teacher in India, but more probably it was carved by a Greek in the north-west of India, the stone itself coming from the Caucasus. It is of tremendous antiquity and its wanderings can be traced from India to Ceylon and thence to Burma. At last it reached Chiang Rai in Northern Thailand and thence gradually came south to Lampang, and from there in A.D. 1468 was moved to Chiang Mai. Gradually it worked its way south from temple to temple until the first king of the present dynasty brought it to Bangkok from Thonburi and had the lovely Wat Phra Keo built to house the holy image. Nowadays it is not only revered as the holiest image in Thailand but its destiny, in the popular view, is bound up with the well-being of the kingdom.

At the base of the altar stand various small models of trees built of gold and silver formerly sent as tribute to the Thai rulers by vassal princes in Laos and Malaya, when these

parts of south-east Asia were under the suzerainty of Thailand. At the sides of the altar are life-size golden statues holding gilt figures representing the Gautama Buddha in his princely vestments before he took to a life of asceticism. They were presented to the temple by Kings Rama the First and Second.

In cloisters surrounding this temple are a tremendous series of wall paintings representing scenes from the Ramayana, the great epic of Hindu literature. In these pictures one can see portrayed all the stories and legends of the old gods, and the battles between the Indians and the people of Ceylon. All sorts of quaint detail add to the interest; Hanuman lying across the straits to form a bridge between India and Ceylon; the Monkey God helping Rama in all sorts of different ways; battles between gigantic opposing forces with squadrons of elephants fighting on either side. One picture depicts Rama, accompanied by his squire in the howdah on the elephant's back. Beside the squire are an enormous collection of weapons of all sorts. Tools like the slashers used for trimming English hedges, pronged forks like those associated with our legends of the devil, straight spears for stabbing, hooks for hauling the opponent off the back of his elephant—all are clearly shown and one could imagine Rama in the height of battle shouting to his squire, "Hand me my slasher" or "Where is my prodger?", and the squire obediently selecting the right tool, like a caddy picking a club from a golf-bag. Irreverent, perhaps, but this is how it struck me on looking at this picture.

Everywhere one looks within the palace enclosures are stone images of dragons, lions and demons brought from China as ballast in the holds of ships trading with that country.

Inside the buildings are marvellous mosaics and inlay work, carved marble overlaid with silver and gold, gold gods and lotuses, slim pillars twined with carved vines—all the craft of eastern workmen embellishing the temples of their gods and palaces of their kings.

The Royal Palace is history in stone and beauty in mother-

of-pearl, porcelain and gold. A never-to-be-forgotten place and one in which to meditate on the artistic glories of the country.

It is not, however, in the Royal Palace alone that beautiful buildings are to be found. On the opposite side of the river the Wat Arun, or Temple of Dawn, towers nearly 250 feet into the sky in a magnificent pyramidal pagoda, decorated layer on layer and tier upon tier with china cups and saucers, an extremely lovely and novel effect. Beside it is a smaller temple guarded by the inevitable gigantic tiled demons, which had such an enormous fascination for me.

Also opposite the Royal Palace, but this time away from the river, is the Wat Po. This again was one of the many buildings begun by Rama the First when he moved the capital to Bangkok and indeed practically all the best buildings, with the very notable exception of the Marble Temple (Wat Benchamabopitr) date from this period. It has been added to and restored at various times during the reigns of Rama the Third and Fifth, but although some people say that it represents all that is worst in Thai architecture, to the casual and ignorant visitor, like myself, it is one of the most interesting and beautiful of them all. Its great claim to fame is a colossal image of the reclining Buddha built in the reign of Rama the Third, more than 100 years ago. The image is over 160 feet long and forty-five high feet, the whole being covered with gold-leaf. Buddha is represented as lying on his side supporting his head with his right hand whilst the left arm lies along the body. It is said to represent Buddha entering Nirvana, which he did in 543 B.C., according to our reckoning. (It may be worth noting that most of the dates given in Thailand are according to the Buddhist year. For example, this Christian year of A.D. 1955 is the Buddhist year 2498, and until this is realized dates of temples and other buildings or historical facts are apt to be rather confusing. The Christian date may always be obtained by subtracting 543 from the Buddhist date). One tiny detail of this Buddha is the beautiful decoration in mother-of-pearl on the soles of the enormous feet, whilst the floor and pedestal



on which the image reclines are beautified with most interesting inlay work of flowers, fishes and animals.

One curious thing in the Wat Po, missed by many, is the assembly of medical axioms and diagrams. Near the entrance to the outer courtyard are a collection of figures portraying most graphically various aches and pains, with directions for their cure and in two of the rooms to the left of the courtyard is a veritable textbook of human anatomy engraved on the cornices. Rows of skeletons drawn in black on the white marble have arrows pointing to various parts of the body. By means of these diagrams the monks used to teach their pupils the art of medicine for it was one of the earliest medical schools of Thailand.

One of the figures is being violently sick; another has a pain in the chest; but perhaps the most amusing is undergoing Thai massage, his legs being pulled almost out of joint whilst he glares at the masseur with a mixed expression of pain and fury—a most intriguing exhibition.

I have left to the last the wonderful Marble Temple, or Wat Benchamabopitr, which means the temple constructed by the fifth king of the dynasty, i.e. Chulalongkorn or Rama the Fifth. Chulalongkorn intended to follow the ancient custom of the Thai kings and to erect new temples to compensate for the loss of the old ones which might fall into disrepair by decay or be destroyed by wars. But he wisely decided that instead of adding to the number of already numerous wats in the country he would spend his money on one single large temple which he would decorate elaborately and make the most beautiful in the kingdom. He accordingly employed artists and architects of note under Prince Navisaranuvattivongs, who used an ancient Thai design adapted to the needs of the site. To my mind this is the jewel of them all, though it was only built during the reign of Chulalongkorn at the end of the nineteenth century. In the words of the guide-book: "It is a fine example of modern Thai art and was constructed with choice materials; Italian marble, Chinese glazed tiles, etc." This gives no idea whatsoever of the beauty of the building. As one comes through the en-



trance gateway a large flagged courtyard lies in front of the temple, which has a white marble front and a porch supported by four white marble pillars and guarded by two sitting marble lions. A white marble balustrade runs along the front of the temple. A flight of steps leads to a beautifully proportioned and carved doorway, the porch itself being of the typical Thai design of roof, superimposed upon roof each gable finished with a curving horn, the whole being tiled with red tiles edged with white stone. The detail work in the gables and porch is intricate and beautifully coloured. Inside is the chamber containing a gilded image of Buddha with a series of stained-glass windows, extremely uncommon in Thailand, presented by Prince Chula. After passing through the side porch one comes into a marble courtyard surrounded by lovely cloisters. In these cloisters, or covered galleries, have been placed a collection of images of Buddha, some of them originals, some of them copies of other famous figures in different Buddhist countries. These were collected by H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. In order to obtain uniformity he, of course, wished to find images of similar sizes so that some of the originals were brought to Thailand from foreign countries as they were found, but other beautiful and noted Buddhas were too small to compare favourably with the rest and enlarged copies of these were cast in bronze, various private people taking the responsibility of having the castings made and presenting them to the King as an act of religious merit. It took many years to collect these fifty-two images, and the last one was only placed in position in the year of King Chulalongkorn's death.

A study of these statues helps a great deal in the understanding of the meanings of the various positions in which Buddhas are found about the country. Thus a standing Buddha with his right hand held up and the index finger bent forward shows Him in the attitude of teaching; though sometimes the teaching Buddha has both hands raised and the index fingers and thumbs with their tips touching. To invoke victory Buddha sits with one leg crossed above the other, the right hand raised and fingers curled forward.



9. Our car about to cross a bridge (near Lophuri)



10. Chiang Dow



11. Demons guarding the entrance to the Wat Arun, Bangkok.



12. In the Brahmin temple at Lophuri, with attendants playing on the ranad ek or bamboo xylophone. The Governor of Lophuri is at the left of the picture



This attitude is sometimes framed in a border of snakes. The most usual image seen throughout the country shows the Buddha sitting with the left forearm and upturned hand resting on his crossed legs, his other hand lying over his right knee. This is the attitude of subduing Mara.\* Another common position is the standing Buddha, where he holds the right hand raised, palm outwards, and forbids his relations to fight one another. Then of course there is Buddha cross-legged in the attitude of mediation, his hands folded one on the other. There are many other attitudes and a detailed study of the statues found in the galleries of Wat Benchamabopitr is well worth while.

In every way the Marble Temple is lovely and interesting and in my opinion is one of the few buildings in the world to compare with the wonderful Taj Mahal in India.

Of course one could go on speaking of the beautiful wats and other buildings in Bangkok, the Houses of Parliament, the huddled and cluttered and almost derelict buildings of the old city; the new buildings with their very modern architecture, surrounding the Ratanakosin Hotel; and the almost futuristic Monument to Democracy. In and about the city run the klongs or canals of Bangkok with their teeming river life and houses built not only down to the water's edge but actually overhanging the water, with roofed-in boats where countless thousands of people live, the whole made colourful by piles of fruit and oriental produce, coconut palms, bougainvillia and flame of the forest which occupy every vacant spot of land. The whole network of waterways winds and twists from the main river all through the city of Bangkok. No wonder it is known as the Venice of the East.

I have no time to do more than mention the very up-to-date and efficient Chulalongkorn hospital, or the university where the Rector, who is also deputy Prime Minister, Air Vice-Marshel Muni Vejayan, gave us lunch. This university alone has 3,300 students, 45 per cent of whom are women. Most of the professors are Thais but there are a few foreign instructors, particularly in engineering. There is one slight

\* The Prince of Darkness.



difference to British universities and that is that though the full degree course takes four years, if, after two years, students are not thought promising enough, they only continue their course for three years, after which they get a diploma instead of a degree. Altogether there are six universities in Thailand all of them in Bangkok, but some of them deal with only one faculty, for example medicine or teaching. Many of the professors, though Thais, have taken their degrees in English or American universities as well as in Thailand.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Snakes*

BEFORE I stop writing of some of the things which amazed and delighted us in this interesting city, I must mention the truly horrible snake farm, the Pasteur Institute, which is doing so much for the cure of snake bite and disease, not only in Thailand but throughout south-east Asia. The Director, Dr. Chaloem Puranananda himself was good enough to tell me a good deal about the Institute, which is similar to the one I have seen at Butantan outside São Paulo in Brazil, or the one in South Africa. Dr. Chaloem told me that the Institute buys any snakes that are brought to him, poisonous or otherwise. The poisonous snakes are kept for the extraction of venom, which is used for the treatment of snake bite and certain other diseases. The non-poisonous ones serve as food for the king cobras or hamadryads, which are cannibals. The consequence is that farmers from all over the country arrive with sacks or bags containing hundreds of snakes of all kinds, knowing that they have a ready market. The farmers make a good thing out of the collection of these reptiles, for the institute will pay a bhat (about 4d.) for a small harmless snake which may be used as food, up to 2,000 bhats for a fifteen-foot long king cobra, though the average price for this breed of snake is about 800 bhats. Small black cobras, equally poisonous, fetch about 10 bhats each. Sometimes farmers will depart from the Institute having dumped their catch and received several thousand bhats on the spot for their work. This policy is a good one; in addition to providing the Institute with the snakes from which the much needed serum is obtained, it is also gradually ridding the country of these pests.

After extracting the venom, which I will describe later, the liquid is dried out and the crystals which remain are treated in various ways to produce the serum. In this horses play an important part and a number of them are kept at the Institute and from time to time are injected with small quantities of the crystallized venom. Subsequently small quantities of blood are taken from the horses and from this the curative serum is made. Nowadays a snake bite is not necessarily as fatal as it was before the serum treatment was brought into being. The Director told me that if a person suffering from snake bite is alive when brought to the Institute, or one of the other 600 dispensaries in the country which carry supplies of serum, the life can almost invariably be saved. Though it is impossible to say how long it takes for a person to die of snake bite, as this depends so much on the quantity of venom injected, the type of snake, the physical conditions of the person bitten, the position of the bite and so on, the average period intervening between the bite and death is somewhere round three to six hours, though if the snake's fangs strike into a vein death will occur within a matter of minutes.

Snakes are found throughout Thailand, the black cobra being common and the banded krait, the king cobra and various vipers abounding in different parts. Rice paddies are very favourite haunts of snakes and it is while harvesting rice that most people are bitten.

The Queen Saovabha Institute, which is the correct name for this snake farm, usually known as the Pasteur Institute, distributes the venom it collects to over 600 dispensaries in Thailand and also sends quantities of serum to surrounding countries in south-east Asia, so that in every way it is an international undertaking of immense value to this part of the world. Queen Saovabha was the Queen of King Chulalongkorn and the Institute is the companion of the Chulalongkorn Hospital.

The things to remember if you are bitten by a snake are: to apply a tourniquet above the bite; not to drink alcohol; and of course get to a dispensary as quickly as possible,

bringing with you the snake that made the bite or, anyhow, a good description of it in order that the correct serum may be used.

Visitors are allowed to see the snakes at almost any time, but twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays are the big occasions when the snakes are fed and venom extracted.

Feeding snakes appears to be just about as dangerous a proceeding as extracting their venom. The snakes are kept in pits, one pit for the banded kraits, another for black cobras, a third for king cobras, whilst the Russell's vipers and other small poisonous snakes are kept in cages in a covered building. On feeding days two or three assistants go into the pits. They wear thick rubber knee-boots but no other protection whatever. The hands, in particular, must be left free as it is vital that the man handling the snakes should have no obstruction to the sense of touch or movement of his fingers. One man stands by with a bottle of milk and a glass tube whilst an assistant picks up a banded krait, black with yellow bands like a wasp and five or six feet long. Sometimes he will seize it by the tail, but more generally, as the snake moves, he will take his opportunity and quietly move his hand down and take the snake by the back of the neck. Whilst it writhes in his hand he will place his foot on its tail and hold the snake vertically whilst the feeder fills a glass tube with milk which he thrusts into the gaping jaws of the snake and down its throat, allowing the liquid to run down into the stomach. The handler, still keeping a grip at the back of the head, then seizes it with his other hand lower down the body and throws it into a water-filled moat which surrounds the pit and proceeds to catch the next snake.

These banded kraits are some of the most poisonous snakes in the world. They absolutely refuse to feed whilst in captivity so they have to be treated like the English suffragettes and forcibly fed to keep them alive.

A similar procedure is gone through with the black cobras, anything from three to five or six feet long. These snakes seem more active than the kraits and considerably more care has to be exercised in handling them. The selected snake



usually realizes it is going to have a meal but does not appear in the least grateful for it. The fore-part of the body rears up a foot or more from the ground, the snake swells out the famous hood of the cobra, the forked tongue darts in and out of the jaws and frequently the snake strikes savagely at its would-be captor. Usually the strike is on the lower part of the leg, which is protected by a thick rubber boot. Quietly and calmly the catcher awaits his opportunity. Sometimes a particularly recalcitrant snake will wind in and out of his legs, striking repeatedly and darting at his hand as he bends down to take it. Then the man will await the right moment to place his outspread fingers and the palm of his hand on the snake's neck, pressing it down to the ground and whilst in this position he gets his grip on the skull, lifting it up to receive the indignity of forcible feeding, after which it is cast away into the moat.

In the third den are the giant king cobras, some of them over twenty feet long. These are cannibals and will sometimes fight among themselves, the victor swallowing its opponent. In addition to being in the sunken concrete pit they are penned within wire enclosures with heavy roofs to prevent their escape. The handler opens the roof and steps in amongst these enormous and deadly reptiles. He seizes one by the tail, gives it a shake to prevent it striking and draws it out of the cage, dropping it on to the floor of the den outside, at the same time watching the others in case of attack. At least two people are needed to handle the king cobra; it is long and thick and strong, but in due course is firmly gripped by the neck and the second man holds its body about two-thirds of the way down. Then, whilst it writhes and struggles, its jaws are forced apart by the squeezing of the first man's fingers and the feeder produces lumps of raw meat, held in enormous forceps, which he rams into the snake's jaws and pushes well down its throat. The man holding the head, with his spare hand massages the lump of meat down the body of the snake. Then a second and a third lump of meat is given, sometimes more, each time being massaged down well into the body, after which the reptile is thrown into the moat,

where it swims round with its head well out of the water looking venomously from right to left as though watching for an opportunity to strike at its tormentors or at the circle of faces peering down from above, as an interested and usually horror-stricken audience gazes fascinatedly at the proceedings. I have said that the king cobras are also fed on snakes. These are just thrown into the den and eaten by the cannibals. Rats and frogs brought in by farmers are given to the ordinary black cobras.

The extraction of venom follows much the same procedure as the feeding of the snakes, only when the jaws are forced open by the handler, the other assistant places a shallow circular glass bowl inside the jaws and presses the poison sacs at the root of the fangs. The venom runs through the point of the hollow tooth on to the glass. It is a viscous, pale-looking liquid. After the selected snakes have had their venom extracted the glasses are taken, each with its load of venom, up to the laboratory to have the liquid extracted so that the crystals may form and in due course be used for the production of the life-saving serum from the horses tethered in the grounds of this chamber of horrors.

I may be asked if the assistants are ever bitten. The answer is "Yes, occasionally, but very rarely; they are too skilled in the handling of snakes." There have, however, not only been bites but deaths from snake bite, probably owing to the fangs striking a vein, among these brave men who work in the cause of health.

## *Chapter Six*

### *Bangkok Incidents*

OF course, other things happened to us in Bangkok besides wandering about temples and visiting snake farms. For example, on the night of our arrival Bisdar asked us to dinner and at the same time told me that a message had arrived that the car was at Prachuap but could not be sent through to Bangkok. It was suggested that we should go by train to Prachuap on the following day to collect the car and then motor back to Bangkok over the same road which we had already covered with Bisdar. There seemed nothing for it and I perforce agreed.

Dinner was a very happy party. We sat in one of the pavilions of Chakrabongse House, Prince Chula's town residence on the bank of the river, to drink our cocktails and chat. There we met His Excellency Nai Kemchart, the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs; Mr. John Taylor of the British Embassy; Luang and Madame Prokob, he being one of the best-known lawyers in Bangkok; Nai and Madame Prawat Sukum (Director-General of Industry); and Nai Taweesadhi, a prominent motorist of the country. All these people were interested in our projected journey. Most of them had motored a good deal in the country and knew various parts. They all gave us a great deal of good advice and seriously asked whether we did not think we were too old for such a journey. How old? I was sixty-one on 25 May 1955. They all undoubtedly thought that we could not possibly manage it; in fact very politely I was told we had bitten off more than we could chew. Needless to say R. and I laughed at them and said we were used to motoring in rough country and would do our best to get round. Help was promised from all quarters and in the midst



of much leg-pulling and good-natured banter we went to the dinner-table on the lawn outside. In a lovely setting of palms and tropical shrubs, with electric lights glowing in the trees, we sat round the table laden with all the various dishes which go to make a good Thai dinner; soup, of course, sweet duck in small pieces, bits of fish from the river, all sorts of vegetables, curry, rice, fragments of chicken, fruit of all sorts.

During dinner Bisdar, our host, was called away. He came back smiling broadly.

"I have got a message for you," he said.

"Good Heavens," I said, "what's happened now?"

"Oh," said Bisdar, "the Governor of Prachuap has got busy. You won't have to go back there, after all. The car is on its way to Bangkok."

I was very relieved; I hate going back on my footsteps.

Next day we were awakened early in the morning, before 3 a.m., by the blaring of bands over the loudspeakers and the roar of tanks concentrating in the park nearby. Sleep was hopeless and to the accompaniment of the thunderous noise of Thai, American and English tunes we dressed and opened the windows of our opaque-glazed, air-conditioned room to watch the troops concentrating for the royal review which was to take place that day. This was Army Day in Bangkok and Bisdar had arranged for invitations to be sent to us from the Commander-in-Chief to witness the review.

Rather rudely perhaps, but in common, I think, with most other western people, I did not expect to see much of a ceremony. I rather expected to see some badly equipped troops slouch by, their ragged ranks showing a lack of discipline and their vehicles showing want of care. I do not know why we should always have this idea about other armies, but I think it is a very usual frame of mind among us.

We walked from the hotel to our seats in a pavilion facing the broad avenue along which the troops would march, taking our places by eight o'clock. His Majesty arrived in a yellow Rolls Royce flying the Royal standard, about nine o'clock and then the troops started to roll by. Most of them came from the Bangkok area and a fair sample of all the various



arms and branches of the army were on parade; half-track vehicles, armoured vehicles, self-propelled guns, modern tanks, lorry loads of troops, anti-aircraft guns, ambulances, field-kitchens—all the paraphernalia of modern war rolled by. But they did not just roll by, they passed with perfect precision, tank dressing by tank and keeping its distance from those in front and behind; lorry loads of troops in excellent formation, every soldier with his arms folded smartly on his chest and looking straight ahead, not a face turned to look at the crowd, apparently not an eye winking as they rolled by. Every anti-aircraft gun had its barrel at the same angle; the self-propelled guns were polished to the last degree. And then at the end came the marching infantry, bands playing, rank after rank stepping out smartly, marching in a style that I had not seen before, a cross between the ordinary infantry pace and the goose-step, each foot slapping down firmly on the road; thousands of feet beating the route as one with a precision which would have done credit to the Brigade of Guards. In the marching thousands were munitions and weapons coming from the U.S.A., from France, from Sweden, from Switzerland, some products of American aid to south-east Asia, some procured from other countries with funds provided by the Americans, but nearly all the equipment was in one way or another provided through American help.

Whilst the troops marched by small aircraft flew overhead in perfect formations of three, not to show the might of the Thai Air Force but dropping showers of flower buds and petals on the route and on the spectators watching the review. Time after time these aircraft flew over, the petals twinkling in the bright sunshine as they fell and then, as a symbol, miniature parachutes carrying tiny dummy soldiers were dropped, just a suggestion of what might be done in the event of war. The King, of course, spoke to his troops, though needless to say we could not understand a word as it came over the loudspeakers. Then he drove by, standing erect in a jeep, carrying a gold baton in his hand, to review the massed troops standing in formation nearby.

We came away after this parade rather thoughtful and made fully aware that Thailand would definitely be able to take her own part in the event of an attempt by surrounding countries to overthrow her government and bring her behind the Iron Curtain.

After lunch we collected our car. We paid 2,529 bhat for its carriage from Padang Besar to Bangkok, against our wishes. It took twelve men to work out the cost, sitting round tables in the good-sheds with several abacuses (is that the right plural for abacus?) which in Thai are called "lu kit". The abacus is the thing we find in some of our old-fashioned kindergarden schools; a frame in which a number of balls are threaded on wires and on which the very young are taught to count. In Thailand there is no question of being taught to count, but with almost incredible speed the manipulators flip the balls backwards and forwards doing addition, subtraction, multiplication and division almost at the same time and producing an accurate result far sooner than I could work it out on paper. Several people at different times tried to show us how the abacus works, but I am afraid R. and I were too stupid to understand it.

We took the car from the station and parked it in the garage at Chakrabongse House, for neither R. nor I could see ourselves using it in the ant-heap of Bangkok. We preferred to use a taxi as we were quite sure we should never find our way about in the maze of streets whilst at the same time watching the tangle of cars, samlohs (rickshaws), trams and people intent on committing suicide.

There are various means of public transport in Bangkok; one can travel by tram, if you can discover where the trams are going; one can travel by a samloh pedalled by a muscular Thai; one can try and commit suicide in a motor samloh, or one can take a taxi. The taxis are, unfortunately, not as our taxis. Some are large and roomy cars, others are extremely small and frequently worn motor vehicles, too small for R. and me to crowd ourselves into. They have no meters though there is an official rate for the hire of taxi cabs. If the hirer knows the route to the place which he wishes to visit and the

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distance, it is possible to work out the correct charge, but generally speaking it is best to get a quotation from the driver first then divide it by four and argue with him to get a fair price. At the end of the journey no doubt you will find that you have paid at least twice as much as a Thai would. It was only when our friend Bisdar sent one of his staff to get a taxi for us and told us what we were to pay and forcibly told the driver what he was going to receive, that we ever got a fair deal in this respect, for taxi-drivers are, I am afraid, the same the world over and foreigners are unfortunately regarded as fair game.

And so at last came the morning before we were due to leave Bangkok. R. had intended to sort out our baggage and leave behind our thick clothing, etc., whilst we took the necessities for our journey in the car with us. In order to start with plenty of clean clothes we had sent almost everything we possessed to the laundry. That morning the laundry had not turned up as promised, and on my asking the room-boy what had happened he lost even the two or three words of English that he usually had at his command. Rather annoyed I went down to the office to demand the return of our things.

"I'm so sorry," replied the desk, after my enquiry, "there was a fire in Bangkok last night and the laundry was burnt down and all your clothes were burnt with it."

Watching me grow purple in the face, the receptionist came in with a hasty:

"Never mind" (apparently the panacea for all ills in Thailand) "you go out and buy some more and the hotel will pay."

That, of course, was something but I simply had not got time to have more suits made, quite apart from buying shirts and pyjamas and all the frocks and underclothes that my wife had lost. However, there was nothing for it and we arranged to spend the afternoon shopping.

As visas for visitors to Thailand are only granted for a fortnight at a time, I had to attend the immigration department to receive permission for us to remain in the country



longer. I anticipated the usual hours of delay, but to my surprise, after I had given my name, I was greeted with a wide smile of welcome and the official stated that he had read about us in the papers and heard about our projected journey on the radio. A rapid look in a card-index beside him and two minutes later the forms we had filled in at the frontier at Padang Besar, together with a couple sent from the Thai Embassy in London asking for permission to grant us a visa, were produced and a few minutes later our passports were handed back stamped and valid for another fortnight. To complete the story of our passports, I would say that I had to make other visits to the immigration department at later dates until the officials really felt that they could not extend the visas any further.

"Well, what must I do," I asked, "I've got to finish my work in the country if I am to write a book about Thailand."

"That's easy," said the helpful official, "you fill in this form." He gave me a sheet of foolscap. "Now at the bottom of this form you address a letter to the Chief of Police and tell him you wish your visas extended still further and give him the reasons why."

I did so and handed the form and letter back.

"And what do I do now?" I asked, "my visa has expired. If a policeman or anyone else asks me for my passport, I don't want to find myself in a Bangkok jail."

"You need have no worry," said my helpful friend, "see what I have written on your passport."

He showed me a few lines of writing in Thai which conveyed nothing whatsoever to me. Seeing me look bewildered, he explained.

"I have said that you have made application to the Chief of Police for an extension. Your letter will be forwarded to the police who will consider it and in due course they will write to us telling us whether or not we may extend the visa. Undoubtedly, as you are known to the Chief of Police, such permission will be granted. It will take some weeks for all this to happen and before the permission or refusal comes through you will have left the country anyhow."



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With that I was content and, of course, it worked. Nobody queried our visas.

Smiling happily we returned to the hotel to be greeted by the cheerful manageress; the one who had previously been a midwife.

"I have good news for you," she said, "your laundry has not been burnt. The building, it is true, was burnt down but a lot of the washing was rescued and among it, fortunately, yours. It is very dirty and is being washed again but you shall have it within a few hours."

And within a few hours it arrived, cleaner and better pressed than it might have been in the ordinary state of affairs.

There were many little odds and ends that interested and amused us in Bangkok. They really have no consecutive place in this account of a journey, but I think some of them are worth recalling.

I liked the smart khaki uniforms of the girl clerks in the post office. There is no question of wearing anything you like and producing the untidy appearance of some of our people behind the counter. Everyone wears the same and every post office girl was pleasant and helpful, though the methods were sometimes rather round about. If one wants to post a registered packet you take your place in the queue to have the packet weighed and on this is written the value of the postage stamps to be placed on it. This done you join another queue and obtain stamps for the value written on the packet. Having done this a third queue is joined where in due course a registered receipt will be handed out. Everything is pleasantly and courteously done, but the posting of a registered packet calls for much patience and ample leisure. In country post offices things are simpler but even slower! I also found after I had posted many packets of film back to England that I had been charged at the wrong rate throughout and had been overcharged a total of about 800 bhat—nearly £14. Each packet of fifty feet of 16 mm. Kodak film had been charged 34-39 bhat postage to England for processing. It was only at the end, after a long though friendly

argument, that I discovered that the correct rate of postage was 13.50, as films travel by airmail as second-class matter. If a senior post office official sees this perhaps he will refund me the difference. Perhaps! This, apart from taxis, was almost the only piece of overcharging we found in the country and was obviously due to carelessness and not to a desire to overcharge.

Another point in postal arrangements is that there do not appear to be any stamps of high denomination and for each packet I had to stick on six or eight, as a rule practically covering the entire surface of the parcel.

On public buildings there is a badge denoting the sacred bird of Thailand. This was particularly prominent on the G.P.O., where we were told the birds came alive during the war and saved the building from destruction by fighting overhead and driving off the bombing aircraft! People really seemed to believe it.

Years ago, on ceremonial occasions the King used to take to the water in the royal barge, wonderfully painted, with a gilt pavilion surmounted by the nine-tiered umbrella and rowed by a vast number of oarsmen with red painted oars. At the bows of the barge was a fierce some gilt and coloured effigy. No longer does the King use the water on ceremonial occasions and the royal barge, together with other boats used in processions by the high dignitaries of the land, are all ashore locked up in a boathouse off the klong near the Admiralty. There we visited them. Nine barges, slim and beautiful in their lines, each bearing at its prow a wonderfully carved and coloured and horribly grinning dragon, nine-headed serpent or other effigy, undoubtedly intended at one time to terrify the enemy in times of war. Perhaps the day will come when the royal barges are once more seen going in procession down the Chao Phraya, but at present Thailand, like the rest of the world, finds ready cash hard to come by and it is too expensive even to put the boats into the water.

## *Chapter Seven*

### *We Motor to Lopburi*

BEFORE we left Bangkok it was suggested that we should take a police escort. Firstly the offer of an escort was undoubtedly a compliment, but secondly it was pointed out that there was considerable danger of attack by bandits in the jungle or by dacoits from over the Burma frontier. Communist terrorists were vaguely hinted at by some people. Further it was said that police would be able to help us with the local authorities in the event of either us or the car getting into difficulties. Nevertheless, R. and I thought that we would like to start without the help of the police and we accordingly left Bangkok with the intention of arriving at Lopburi the same day.

We had no difficulty in finding our way out of Bangkok and as the houses of the city began to fall behind we had our first glimpses of the beauty and interest that were to accompany us throughout our tour. The irrigation ditches beside the road were in places covered with masses of pink and white lotuses and water-lilies. Wallowing in the mud and festooned with lilies were numbers of enormous and dangerous-looking water buffaloes, their horns spreading quite five feet from their powerful heads. In reality the water buffalo is a quiet beast with his owners and can be driven and herded, and indeed usually is, by a child, who takes him home after the day's work, sitting on his broad back and kicking the lumbering beast in the ribs to make him speed up towards the homestead. To strangers, however, he will sometimes show signs of attack, more in fear of the strange person than in bad temper. Generally they will gallop away, which is what the water buffaloes did in this case. They staggered to



their feet, water and liquid mud running down their sides. With a sucking sound they drew each leg out of the mud and clumsily climbed the bank, then galloped lumberingly away over the dried-up paddis with trails of pink and white lilies hanging from their somewhat ludicrous bodies. It was a beautiful and amusing beginning to our tour.

A little further along we came across people fishing in these roadside ditches and ponds, which were barely a foot deep and indeed little more than marshes. Yet numbers of almost naked men and women were paddling in the muddy water carrying long poles at the ends of which were lines from which were suspended nets. The rods were extended and the nets dropped into the water. A short pause then they were lifted. Sometimes one or two tiny fish might be found in the net and these were rapidly transferred to a pocket or bag or sometimes a cane basket and the net cast in once more. In other places men were casting nets, whirling them round their heads and causing them to fall into the water perfectly spread. They, too, were pulled up in a few minutes, usually empty but sometimes there was the silver gleam of a fish. Yet others wandered about in the mud with cane baskets shaped like and about the same size as the old-fashioned bee-skep. As they paced they jabbed these down into the water and presumably, if they were lucky enough to place the basket over a fish, it betrayed itself by its splashing, though I never saw anyone catch anything in this manner. The fourth method we noticed, in other places, was for a man or boy to walk along in the mud where the water was even shallower, prodding with a sharp, pointed stick or occasionally with a proper fishing spear. Here again I suppose they sometimes caught something, though I never found out what lived in the mud. Possibly mudfish or eels. Anyhow the day's catch was all destined for the pot and made a welcome addition to the normal ration of rice.

Sometimes we came across a man pushing a loaded canoe along one of the irrigation ditches. The water was too shallow for the canoe to float but the mud was soft and greasy and the boatman walked behind his canoe and pushed. It was all



very usual I expect to the Thais but all novel and interesting to us, so that our journey progressed very slowly owing to frequent stops to take pictures.

After a time we came to a river over which the road ran on a wooden bridge. Beside the bridge were a number of open booths, very temporary shelters built of bamboo and thatched with palm leaves. In the shade sat the owners, in front of them huge piles of melons and vegetables, green coconuts, bananas, oranges and other fruits. On the river itself canoes were being paddled along the water way, some open and rather like Thames punts, others with a curved tent-like erection of bamboo covering them from end to end. Once or twice small sails had been erected. Beyond the bridge several rather larger boats, also covered in with a top like an old American covered wagon, were moored and inhabited by families of water-living Thais, for a large proportion of the population lives on the water and every waterway which is at all navigable has its full quota of house boats.

Once or twice we came across signposts with the names of towns and figures written in Thai characters and also in English, but as we got further away from Bangkok the English letters were dropped and only Thai characters appeared on the direction posts, though strangely enough the distances were still given in our western figures.

On poles or the branches of trees beside the road sat birds like kingfishers with the same iridescent blue body feathers and heavy bright red beaks. In the swamps were white birds like egrets and others like small grey herons. Kites floated overhead. In the mud buffaloes and children wallowed happily. I noticed what lovely skins most of the Thai people have; possibly there is something in mud baths after all.

On either side of the road a flat, featureless plain spread to the horizon, divided into rectangular patches by low banks, paddis for growing rice, but at present all was dry and brown. When the rains came they would fill with water and rapidly, as far as the eye could see, the whole countryside would be one rippling sea of bright green as the rice sprang

from the mud in which it was planted. Clumps of bamboo and trees like *causarinas* occasionally relieved the monotony, and once we came to an enormous sign beside the road, covered in Thai characters and at the bottom in plain English, "Welcome to Saraburi"! We had crossed the borders of a new province and, indeed, Saraburi is an interesting place if for no other reason than because of the tremendous settlement scheme which has been inaugurated there, granting a few acres of land and a house to suitable Thais who cultivate the land under supervision. The whole plain was shining and quivering in the heat. Our thermometer registered 96° F. in the car at noon. The sun was right overhead. There was no shade. Even the birds perching on the trees nearby were sitting with their beaks wide open as though panting in the heat.

After searching for some time for a shady spot in which to eat a picnic lunch we squatted in the ditch under some straggling boughs, pestered by ants and we were covered in dust every time a car went by, though in fairness I should say that the road from Bangkok to Lopburi has a tarred surface, one of the very few roads of this type that we saw in Thailand. Undoubtedly other highways will be surfaced in due course but that time is yet to come.

As we drove along we noticed every few miles, at more or less regular intervals, sentry boxes beside the road. When the car approached a policeman, smart with white gloves, would step out, peer at the number, then come to attention and salute. Later we found that although we had refused a police escort the police were available in case we got into trouble even on this simple stretch of the road. They had been supplied with a description of the car and its number and were on the look out for us.

Soon after lunch great granite-like hills arose abruptly from the plain, the road passing through a gap in the group of mountains which overshadowed the surrounding flat countryside. As evening drew on we passed through various villages where children were coming out of school. Indeed, it was amazing the number of schools that we passed, not only

here but in all Thailand, usually long, wooden buildings supported on piles. Sometimes classes were held among the piles under the building, presumably because it was cooler. Even in these small villages all the children were uniformly clad, the girls in white blouses or jumpers and black or dark blue skirts; the boys in khaki shirts and shorts. At first sight I thought there were immense numbers of boy scouts about, particularly as some wore a scarf and a fore and aft cap. Perhaps they *were* scouts but the B.P. hat was missing.

Eventually we drove into Lopburi, travelling for several miles over a fine, wide road with a good surface, shops and buildings on either side and numbers of soldiers strolling about. Indeed Lopburi is the largest garrison town in Thailand, after Bangkok. In the centre of the town we stopped to ask a policeman for the governor's office as we had been instructed to do at each town when we arrived. At once an official in khaki uniform came across the road and greeted us in English. He said the Governor had sent him to wait for us and take us along to his house. The Governor himself was very pleasant, but spoke no English. Through the interpreter he asked us to dinner, told us he had arranged for us to stay at the police headquarters hotel and suggested that we should go there and have a bath, after which he would call for us and show us the sights of the town. So to the police hotel we went, a fairly modern building very plainly furnished, where we were given a room with a single bed and the usual eastern bathroom adjoining. We took off our travel-stained clothes, poured bowls of water over our heads and bodies and by the time we were refreshed and wearing clean clothes the Governor had arrived to show us the sights.

Lopburi is one of several towns in Thailand which at one time or another have been the capital of the country. When the Thais had established their kingdom in the north they sent to the Khmers, whose capital was Lopburi, to ask for a person of royal blood to become their sovereign. At another period Lopburi had been the capital of Cambodia when this included Thailand, and at the time when Ayuthya was the capital of the country King Naria made Lopburi his



summer capital and built an enormous palace there. This was the first spot to which the Governor took us.

In reality there is not very much left to see; the surrounding walls and a few gateways with rows of niches framing the portals. In these niches, during the time of Lopburi's magnificence, candles were placed to light the hall and must have produced a very pretty effect. The site of the elephant stables can still be seen, and yet another part of the palace has been turned into a museum where are housed several hundred heads of Buddha which have been rescued from the ruins, whilst a few have been brought from other parts of the country.

The Governor did not speak English, but some of his staff did, and from the palace of King Narai we went to the wat of Cambodian origin with its triple prang, which is the principal relic of Lopburi. The three pagodas still stand in a fair state of preservation and are synonymous with Lopburi and are sometimes used almost as a badge of Thailand. They are enormous and dominate the town. We duly admired them and walked about in the ruins.

Nearby, in an erection rather like a bandstand, were a number of Buddhist monks sitting in their saffron robes and waiting for later arrivals so that a number of them could go on pilgrimage together. They glanced at us curiously as though western people were not very frequent visitors.

To my mind, and R. agrees, the highlight of Lopburi is not its ancient palaces, museum of countless Buddhas or triple prang, but the collection of monkeys which swarm over the huge rock in the centre of the town where is situated a Brahmin temple. After the somewhat heavy sightseeing which we had undergone they provided a welcome light relief as old and young, large and small, they frolicked about the rock and came down to the ground nearby to examine these curious visitors who insisted on photographing them. A puppy joined in their play and had his ears severely boxed by an old mother monkey, who then lost her nerve and lolloped off. The puppy, bereft of his would-be playmate, suddenly saw a number of young monkeys smaller

than himself and dashed off to play with them, but they would have none of it and fled in dismay. A small, completely naked child stared at us for a long time and gratefully accepted a few sweets, putting his hands together in the polite and pleasant gesture of greeting of the Thai people.

On the rock itself is the temple and just inside the entrance were three men playing on the *ranad ek*, or treble xylophone, made of bamboo. As the players saw the Governor and his visitors arrive they redoubled their efforts and the musical, and surprisingly bell-like, notes sounded sweetly in the evening air.

Beside the effigy were joints of bamboo containing numbered bamboo slips. I noticed one of the people who had come with us kneeling before the image and rattling these slips in the bamboo pot. After a time one of the slips fell out. He picked it up, replaced it and stopped rattling. I thought it was some form of worship but it was explained to me that he was merely having his fortune told, and I was invited to try my luck also, so I seized the pot and shook and rattled until at last one of the sticks fell out, when it was eagerly grabbed by one of the entourage, who went to a side-table and, comparing its number with a series of printed blocks of paper, tore off the appropriate leaf and proceeded to read it. This was apparently my fortune, but I still have not found out what was foretold as, unfortunately, I could not read Thai characters. Anyhow the man who read it went into peals of laughter and called the others to come and look, whereupon they all read it with shouts of glee and repeated it to the Governor, looking at R. and me with most amused glances. Nothing would induce them to tell us what the paper said. All I could get was the remark that I had an exceedingly good fortune. I would still like to know what they really read, for it kept them amused for the rest of the evening.

On top of the rock where the temple is situated the monkeys swarmed, clinging to the crevices, jumping into the trees, hanging down from the boughs and trying to snatch our hats or cameras. They were completely fearless, aware of

the fact that they were protected as some of the temple hangers-on. When the monkeys threatened to become rather a nuisance, a temple attendant picked up a papier mâché mask of a tiger. Holding this in his hand he advanced towards the beasts and after one glance they scattered in all directions, shrieking shrilly as they took refuge in the high branches of the trees. Tigers eat monkeys and monkeys know it and take no chances whether their enemy be of flesh and blood or only of papier mâché.

By now it was getting dark and the Governor returned to his residence asking us to follow as soon as we wished.

We returned to our hotel rather tired and very thirsty. In a glass case in the hall was an array of bottles and among them I saw a bottle of whisky, so we sat down and asked for a drink. We were at once offered Green Spot, Coca Cola or Birley.

"No," said I, "I would like a whiskey and soda."

Noticing the puzzled expression on the servant's face I went to the glass case and pointed to the whiskey. My gesture caused a certain amount of consternation and for some minutes we sat whilst they hunted for the keys. Eventually they produced the bottle, two glasses and two bottles of soda. I thoroughly enjoyed that drink but had an awful shock when I came to pay. I was handed a bill for the equivalent of about £4 10s., certainly the costliest whiskey and soda I have ever had in any country, but my consternation was somewhat mitigated when, having paid and moving off to our bedroom, the servant ran after us and presented me with the bottle. This is not quite the most expensive bottle of whiskey I have ever bought. In Rio de Janeiro some years ago, about Christmas time, it was priced at £12 a bottle and even after the festive season was over it only dropped to £10.

Two police officers had waited to take us to the Governor's residence and we set out to drive two or three miles back through the town in darkness. As I was not aware of the fact that the government had done so much to ensure our comfort on this journey and I had been asked always to advise



the Governor of the place where we were due to arrive the following day, I thought, as a courtesy, I should notify the Governor of our next stop—over that we were in fact going to arrive the following day. Accordingly we sought the telegraph office and were taken by the police to the back quarters, the office having long since closed, where in semi-darkness two operators were busy sending off messages. I wrote my telegrams in English and handed them over. The police, one of whom spoke English, were rather amused by my telegram but courteously complied with the necessary formalities on my behalf whilst I watched the little geckos running about the wooden walls and ceiling making odd noises rather like "tut tut". Later, when we found that these little lizards were everywhere, always in the bedrooms, where they caught mosquitoes and flies, R. said that their exclamation of "tut tut", which frequently came from them, was caused by some of the sights they saw in some of the bedrooms they frequented. Quite possibly, and we grew to like our friendly little lizards.

However, I am digressing. When the telegrams had been duly paid for and we were going back to the car, one of the police officers asked me why I had sent them, and I explained that it was to let the Governor of Nakorn Sawan know when we should arrive. He smiled broadly.

"But he already knows that," he explained, "every Governor and every police headquarters has had messages about you and in addition we have heard all about you in the newspapers and your arrival and tour has been broadcast on the radio. Look," he said, "at the instructions given to the police of Lopburi."

He extracted from his pocket two sheets of duplicated foolscap, all, of course, in Thai so that I could not read it but he explained that it described us and our car, how we were to be treated, and so on. He then produced another sheet of typewritten matter.

"And these," he said, "are the Governor's instructions to us," including a list of places of interest which we were to see.

Later we found that roughly this procedure had been

followed in every place we visited. Certainly they knew all about us and everyone had thoroughly organized our sight-seeing and made quite sure that we were well taken care of.

The Governor gave us an excellent dinner, though conversation was somewhat stilted as everything that was said had to be translated, but our host beamed kindly at us (his wife was away) and kept asking if we liked Thailand. He asked us what time we proposed to leave Lopburi and when I said we would like to leave at first light, he invited us to breakfast in his home and asked if we would like to have a police escort in a Landrover. We said we thought it was unnecessary and he dropped the suggestion but said he would send someone with us to act as an escort on the first part of our journey. We then returned to the hotel for our night's rest.

## *Chapter Eight*

### *We come to Nakorn Sawan*

I WAS optimistic in thinking we should have a night's rest. Thais are Buddhists, and one of the ethics of their religion forbids them to take life. In consequence pi-dogs and stray dogs of every kind and variety multiply innumera- bly, many of them mangy and diseased, but religion forbids the merciful hand of death. It is true that in Bangkok and some of the other large towns recent ideas interpret the teachings of Buddha in a more modern way and many of the diseased animals are caught and destroyed. But in Lopburi the dogs were legion. They roamed the town all night. They fought and barked and howled. The din was awful. Sleep was impossible.

Just outside our hotel trains were shunting and whistling. On the other side lorries roared by at intervals. Lopburi appeared to be a very busy town, almost as busy by night as by day. It was very hot and we got little air through the thick mosquito curtains with the tiny mesh necessary to keep out sand flies. In addition, R. and I had to share a narrow, single bed. At first light we arose, hot, irritable and bleary-eyed. A cold douche from the Ali Baba revived us somewhat, but R., not unnaturally, complained that she had a headache.

I paid our bill and we went back to the Governor's residence for breakfast, a most sumptuous meal of spiced chicken, soft-boiled eggs, toast, soda water, coffee and tangerines. There was also a New Year's cake, iced and decorated, which we excused ourselves from cutting, for we noticed the anxious faces of the Governor's young children peering round a doorway at us. When the Governor saw



that we liked tangerines he selected a number of the finest which he insisted on our taking with us. Then after photographing him and the provincial education officer outside his residence we said good-bye and started on our journey, with the education officer in the car with us.

It had been suggested that we should make a detour from the main road to visit the Wat Pra Ngam, famous for its enormous Buddha built on the hillside, a figure about 250 feet high and over 180 feet wide. When it came in sight it completely dominated the countryside, rising from the forest that carpeted the hill. Our escort led us in through the entrance and up to the monastery and nunnery where saffron-robed men and white-clad women with shaven heads were at worship in their temple. The nuns were seated in rows, chanting rhythmically in high, nasal voices. We peeped at them and at the Buddha before which they knelt and unobtrusively listened to their chanting. I found it peculiarly soothing, possibly by reason of its monotony, and the high nasal tones were not at all unpleasant. We moved quietly away and walked about the grounds.

Hanging from a frame was an enormous log of wood cut out in a special way near the base. Leaning against the frame was a wooden club which our escort took in both hands and, smiting the wood with it, produced deep, reverberant, bell-like notes which boomed hollowly along the hillside. These gongs, sometimes of wood, sometimes of metal, occasionally of stone, are usually found at Buddhist temples and are beaten by visitors variously to drive away evil spirits, as a prelude to prayer or simply to announce that they have arrived and are about to enter the temple. We did not climb the mountainside to the image of Buddha itself but photographed it from below. I think our escort was rather disappointed with us, but both R. and I had vivid memories of climbing in the heat to the palace of King Mongkut, down into the caverns nearby and up and down to the monastery which we had visited on the same day. I may say now that throughout our tour we were expected to do an enormous amount of walking up flights of seemingly

interminable steps or scrambling up rough and rocky mountain paths. In a temperature of about 130° F. in the sun this becomes trying and tiring and we were not as agile and supple as the Thais. As I have said, we are not ardent sightseers and sometimes, I am sure, sadly disappointed our friends.

From Lopburi to Koke Katiam, the village near Wat Pra Njam, the road was good with a tarred surface, as it had been all the way from Bangkok, but after leaving this village it deteriorated and was poorly surfaced with gravel, with immense corrugations and pot holes. As these holes and ridges are constantly filled up with dusty earth dug from the paddis and bush alongside the road, thick clouds of dust enveloped the car and provided unpleasant conditions for all road users.

We went on over this very bad road as far as Koke Samrong where we had intended to stop to buy bath towels, more films and bread, if possible. We had to stop anyhow for on the outskirts of the town the jolting and bumping became worse and we stopped to inspect the car. As I thought, we had a flat tyre. Fortunately there was a garage of a rough and ready type a short distance away and our escort brought a garage hand with a jack to remove the wheel and mend the tube. A four-inch nail, doubtless picked up on the last wooden bridge, was the cause of the puncture.

Whilst repairs were being done we sat at a roadside café drinking the inevitable Green Spot, sucking the cool liquid straight from bottles through straws. Around us were lorry drivers and people from the village, or perhaps I should say town, because when we walked down to the busier parts to buy our towels and other things, we found it was quite a considerable place where we were able to buy all the things we wanted.

There was considerably more traffic on the roads than we expected; the lorries and buses were filled to overflowing. January, which month it was, is the special season in which to pay respect to the gods, so the villagers collected along

the roadside, making decorated booths with Buddhas and flags and armed themselves with large bowls to collect alms from travellers in aid of temples, schools and village halls.

By the roadside, too, were clumps and plantations of kapok trees with large numbers of green pods hanging from the branches. When these are ripe they are filled with a fluffy fibre surrounding the seeds. In Thai this is known as "noon" meaning "soft and pliable", and is, of course, used for stuffing cushions, pillows, mattresses, lifebelts and other things.

The countryside was dry and shrivelled up. Most of the trees were without leaves for this was nearing the end of the dry season and the rains were yet to come. All along the road the vegetation was covered in dense layers of red dust thrown up by passing vehicles. From time to time we passed cyclists with coloured material tied over their front lamps. When we asked the reason we were given many answers. Some people told us that the coloured fabric was to keep out the dust; others said it was for decoration and still others said the rags were "to pay my respect to the head of the object", i.e. the bicycle lamp. I still wonder what was the real reason. Similarly, many of the lorries had pink silk material tied to the radiator cap. In this case, I understand, the material was to bring good luck or to show that the vehicle had been blessed by a monk to prevent accidents.

Petrol stations were relatively plentiful. Every town and most large villages had a pump supplying Shell or Caltex or Mobilgas, so that it looked as if one of our minor problems was not going to be such a problem after all.

From Koke Samrong the road was very similar in surface, running through low scrub and thin forest denuded of trees and covered in dust. Patches of the countryside were being burned to clear the land for cultivation, and flames and smoke made the burning air even hotter.

In the evening we reached Nakhorn Sawan. As we entered the town a policeman stepped into the road and held up his hand for us to stop. We were then introduced to the Mayor,



## THAILAND JOURNEY

Nai Vichai Siripharb, who was waiting to take us to our hotel. It was about five o'clock in the evening and he had apparently been waiting for us since early afternoon. He explained that the Governor had received the signal we sent from Lopburi saying we should arrive that evening and he did not want to be late in welcoming us. He took us to a very pleasant hotel on the banks of the river Chao Phraya, now at its dry season level, but which during the rains comes up almost to the walls of the hotel. Subsequent experience showed us that this was one of the best hotels in Thailand. We were given a large comfortable room and a pleasant bathroom with a shower and normal w.c. Within two minutes of our arrival a boy brought in cups and a pot of Thai tea—very weak, very pleasant and very refreshing—a nice gesture which we found repeated in many places where we stopped during our journey. Soon afterwards a small boy came into the room with a note asking if there was anything we wanted. We had enjoyed the weak Thai tea so much we just wrote "More tea". To our dismay a few minutes later a pot of real Australian brew in which a spoon would almost stand upright arrived. "More tea" had been interpreted too literally.

Later we bought some of this tea to take back with us. It cost us over £2 a pound!

The Mayor said he expected we would like a bath (he had obviously noted we were dusty!) and he would come again for us in an hour's time so that we might call on the Governor, Siri Woranart. We sluiced ourselves down under the shower, changed into clean clothes and found Vichai Siripharb awaiting us with an escort of police.

Again the Governor spoke no English but the Mayor acted as interpreter whilst our police escort sat in an adjoining room peeping through the doorway. Every now and again a head would cautiously peer round the door jamb to survey the strangers they were looking after, only to bob back abruptly when the owners realized that we were smiling at his interest. The Governor gave us an acceptable drink of cool water. When I welcomed this and said we would

fill our water-bottles before leaving the town, he hastily said through our interpreter,

"No, no, the water is not safe."

R. and I looked at one another but by that time we had drunk it. Anyhow we did not suffer any ill effects. He urged very strongly that we must have a police escort because of robberies in the north and bandits and dangers generally. We felt we must agree and took our departure.

The province of Nakorn Sawan has a population of about 300,000 people and is a centre of the rice and teak industries. The enormous baulks of timber which are floated down the river are gathered up into rafts at this point (one of several) and then navigated or even towed down to Bangkok on the Chao Phraya. This is a suitable place for the making of the rafts as the northern rivers join with the main stream at this point. A good deal of dealing in teak also takes place here, according to the Mayor.

Our police escort for the following day was sent for and introduced to us at the hotel, Police Lieutenant Vinai, a nice, cheerful-looking young man speaking a fair amount of English. He was to accompany us on our next stage to Raheng in the province of Tak, but as we soon found we liked him and could understand his English we asked if he could accompany us for the rest of our tour, but this his chief could not allow.

We dined well from shark's fin soup, fish, rice and some totally unknown dish, with Green Spot and tea.

It was hot and sticky. The temperature in the car during the afternoon was 104° F., and I see from my notes that I have written "roads bad to very bad".

There was little to see in Nakorn Sawan. It was purely a business centre, but I must comment on the dentists' premises with the chairs placed in full view from the street where sightseers gathered to watch the victims undergoing their operations. Teeth are frequently black from chewing betel, and are sometimes accounted as a beauty so one of the dentist's jobs is to lacquer teeth black for some of his clients.

The next day we left accompanied by Lt. Vinai. At first we travelled on a tarred road for about three miles and our hopes were rising, when the surfaced highway came to an end and we found ourselves bumping over gravel and rock and more dust than we had hitherto encountered. From time to time we came to a place where the wooden bridge was unservicable and under repair, or the road had fallen away or something else had happened to cause the route to plunge abruptly over the side of the road (many of the roads are built six to ten feet above the surrounding countryside) and wander off through the bush sometimes for several miles, until once more we climbed up to the highway. These deviations were really hard going. Lorries, which are the main traffic on the Thai roads, had cut deep ruts into the dust or mud, so that a car with a high clearance like the Standard Vanguard or Landrover was essential to move along at all. Great holes appeared from time to time and into these we climbed gingerly in bottom gear and out the other side. Many times the wheels span helplessly in the soft sand. But here our desert experience came in useful and we were always able to move along. Small hillocks and irregularities in the natural lie of the land all added to the difficulties. Rocks, tree trunks and bushes added variety, but surely and slowly, in bottom gear, we negotiated these deviations, climbing a hill of about 45 degrees back to the crown of the road. Occasionally, before plunging on to one of these deviations we saw a cloud of dust in the distance and realized that somebody else had got there first and was coming in the opposite direction. Occasionally we waited but generally we just went on, as the countryside beside the new tracks was generally quite as good and sometimes better than the ruts cut by lorries.

Once during the morning Lt. Vinai became quite excited and pointed out to us a number of men dashing about in the undergrowth and throwing knives. It almost looked as though a miniature battle was in progress, but he explained that they were simply hunting rabbits. Nearby we saw shelters of bamboo erected on high poles to give shade to





13. Making the road between Fang and Chiang Rai



14. A farm near Chiang Rai



15. Feeding a King Cobra at the Pasteur Institute, Bangkok.

the cattle. Ricks of hay or rice straw were built up around one pole so that, as the cattle ate the lower courses, the hay gradually slid down, always keeping a supply available for them.

The many uses to which bamboo is put are truly amazing. Many huts and indeed dwelling houses are built of stout bamboo poles six inches or even more in diameter, the floor joists of bamboo being lashed to the uprights with split cane or rattan and woven cane mats are thrown down to make the floor. The walls of the huts are also of these woven strips of split bamboos and the roof is built up of bamboo rafters and thatched with palm leaves. Cattle shelters and fences are built of the same material. Cups are made out of a joint of the hollow bamboo. Foodstuffs of all sorts and merchandise are carried in the hollow stems, and in one case we found a complete water-wheel entirely built of bamboos with not a nail in it.

Once we came to a road diversion which looked even worse than most and here our police escort collected the men who were repairing the broken-down bridge and made them move large logs which were in the way and lay down a light framework of wood to enable our car to negotiate the gaps in the bridge. We began to realize the police escort was indeed worthwhile.

Buddhist priests in bright saffron robes carrying vivid red umbrellas moved in single file along the road, each accompanied by a young attendant—monks moving from wat to wat or going on teaching pilgrimages.

At the small town of Kampang Pet, we were due to pick up another police escort as we were in a different province, but our officer was unable to find the new Landrover at the point he expected so we went down to the river, as he explained, to call on the Governor and see what had happened. We came to a wide expanse of water about half a mile across. There was no bridge and, as far as I could see, no way of going over. Then we saw a bus lumber down a bumpy, sandy track and gently ease itself on to a rickety raft constructed of the inevitable bamboos and some more solid



timbers placed across two pontoons. A number of men then started to pole off from the shore with long bamboos and very slowly, inch by inch, the raft with the bus on board moved out into the river. At the pace at which it moved I estimated that it would have taken about an hour to cross and presumably the same to come back to pick us up. Then another two hours for our journey there and back, plus an hour finding and talking to the Governor and it would be dark. My heart sank, but Police Lt. Vinai who had been talking to some of the people standing by said that our new escort was somewhere on this side of the river and we had probably missed them on the road from the town. So back to the town we went and along a side road as far as the junction with the main road where he had expected to find them.

Still no sign of the Landrover so once more we went into Kampong Pet, this time to find something to eat. We had already given up the idea of picnicking. There was nowhere pleasant to stop, no trees to sit under, no shade, and tinned sardines, liquid butter and stale bread seemed most unappetising. As we once more entered the village we found the new escort cruising slowly along the road looking for us, so I parked the car and we went to one of the restaurants, to which we soon became used, to have our meal. This was merely an open-fronted shack with two or three tables, the cook performing miracles on a ramshackle stove in the corner and, of course, half the population standing outside to gaze at us. The proprietor brought a bowl of water for us to wash our hands and amidst the interested glances and curious remarks of the people in the street we washed off some of the dust before eating. Green Spot, cool from the ice-box (ice-boxes or refrigerators were always available until one got into the northern and eastern parts of the country) whiled away the time whilst the proprietor prepared an omelette and pomelo for us. Vinai did not like our choice of omelette and pomelo and announced that he would have some "lice". Rather horrid sounding, but of course simply the result of learning English from local teachers. When we explained to him the difference between the meaning of the word spelt

with the "L" and an "R" and the different sounds of the two letters he very soon saw the idea and laughed heartily when he thought of the dish he had suggested; but a little later our new escort told us that in so many miles we must look out for a road turning to the "Refit" and we had to make the explanations all over again. We found invariably that the Thais to whom we talked were only too anxious to profit by any explanations of the language and joined with us in laughing at their mistakes. They then had their own back by trying to teach us a few words of Thai and reduced themselves to paroxysms of mirth at our unseemly efforts to speak on the right note. They obviously loved explaining that we had said something perfectly appalling when we were meant to utter a polite word. It was all very amusing and we had lots of fun on many, many occasions.

Pomelo is a large fruit somewhat similar in appearance to a large grapefruit. The Thai word sounds like "sum oh". It has a tough and difficult peel and when this comes off the liths inside are each coated in a tough parchment-like skin. The fruit is fleshy, juicy and refreshing, not too sweet and not too sour, in other words a very useful fruit.

We had been told by our friends in Bangkok that if we were doubtful what to order for a meal to demand "cowpat". They were somewhat surprised when R. and I burst out laughing and made faces at one another, but after some explanation of the English meaning generally applied to the word "cowpat", they told us the meal was not as bad as it sounded; it was fried rice with small pieces of meat shredded into it and if we wished to take it away from the restaurant it would be wrapped up for us in a piece of banana leaf. Cowpat did indeed form a large part of our diet in the following weeks and we always found it a pleasant enough food.

We were now getting into the wilder parts of the country and our new police officer, accompanied by two policemen with sub-machine-guns, very gravely warned us not to stop on any account for anyone.

"Never stop for anyone," he said. "If someone steps into

the road and raises his hand for you to stop drive faster. If you see a baby lying in the road drive round it, but *do not stop.*"

He emphasized this, saying again, very gravely, "Do not stop."

He explained this was a favourite bait of the bandits. We began to wonder if some of the stories we had been told about the wilder parts of Thailand were true, but as it turned out no one thumbed a lift and no baby-baits were laid to entrap us.

After lunch the country changed. Instead of straggly bush, occasional trees and rice paddis, we drove through thick forest. The road was full of corrugations but they smoothed out somewhat when we drove fast.

It is the custom of R. and myself, wherever we are motor-ing, to change drivers every hour, so that on our journeys we drive an equal amount. This is far less tiring than if one driver does a long spell and only gives up when he or she is tired. But at our first pause after lunch to change seats the police Landrover came up after us in a cloud of dust and smoke and a screeching of tyres. In a matter of seconds the police fell out with machine-guns at the ready, watching the bush on both sides of the road for the suspected bandits. Fortunately no innocent villager happened to pass by as I dread to think what his fate might have been. When we explained what was happening all was smiles and once more we moved on, though at the next halt, when R. decided to find a convenient haystack or other suitable cover, the police were after her like a shot and despite her protests insisted on mounting sentry over her. To them it seemed merely a matter of course and all in the day's business. There was no unpleasantness about the matter at all and as R. remarked later on, before she left Thailand she had lost all sense of modesty. I may add that they took the same precautions if I paused beside the road.



## *Chapter Nine*

### *A Boxing Tournament at Raheng*

WE reached Raheng in the middle of the afternoon and as we entered the town were picked up by another police patrol and led to the Governor's house where his wife welcomed us with understandable English and entertained us until the Governor arrived. He also spoke a little English, though not as well as his wife, and after drinks we were taken to the government resthouse for a bath and a change before going the rounds. That afternoon the temperature in the car was only 100° F.

The resthouse at Raheng was a pleasant wooden building and as usual it was built on piles well above the ground so that we parked the car beneath our bedroom. A flight of wooden steps took us up to a cool lounge from which opened a dining-room looking over the local river, with bedrooms to right and left. We had the one to the left with the usual type of bathroom communicating, and were very glad indeed to drink our tea, souse ourselves in water and get into clean clothes.

As the reader may wonder how we managed for clean clothes, and we had at least one set of fresh things every day, I can say that the laundry arrangements in Thailand are better than they are in England. Clothes handed in one day are returned the following day, washed and ironed. If a point is made of it they can be handed in in the morning and returned the same evening. In consequence, we were able to carry a reasonable quantity of baggage and always turn up fresh and clean in the evening; R. usually in a cotton frock and myself in a sharkskin or linen suit. Incidentally, R. travelled in a frock and not in slacks.

Tea was brought to us as soon as we appeared and shortly afterwards the Governor, Nai Prakrob Submani, with his wife Mme. Charuni, the Forestry Officer, Chan Watanasuvakul, the Highway Engineer, Chaleo Vajrabukka, the Chief of Police and more policemen arrived to take us first to a temple in which was housed a revered statue of the King who liberated Thailand from Burma, King Naresuen. We then drove through the town to look at the busy open-fronted shops and rather narrow, crowded streets (to R's. joy driving against the traffic in "one way" streets because the Governor could do no wrong!) and then into the jungle to climb a mound of rocks in the twilight to admire the view of the surrounding countryside.

It was dark when we returned to the bungalow and dinner was on its way, superintended by the sub-Governor, Prince Boomyaridhi Kohemsanta. The Prince did not speak English but beamed genially on us all whilst the Governor explained that the Princess had herself baked the bread for our meal as they had heard that English people always like this when they eat and bread is not always available in Thailand. It was little incidents of this nature that demonstrated the kindness and hospitality of the Thais.

Dinner was a very gay meal. The Governor spoke fairly good English and Mme. Charuni, his wife, improved rapidly as the time went on for she automatically remembered a language which she had obviously once spoken almost perfectly, and R. and she got on wonderfully well. Chan Watanasuvakul also spoke excellent English and everyone at the dinner table spoke at least a few words.

In the course of conversation the question of Thai boxing cropped up, a sport which I very much wanted to see. To my surprise the Governor announced that there was a boxing tournament in Raheng that evening and asked if we would like to go. Of course I jumped at the chance though R. was just a little diffident about it. She had never seen boxing, even under Queensberry Rules, and what she had heard about Thai boxing made her wonder whether or not she would like it. However, we all went, making

up a party occupying the front row of the ringside seats.

I should explain that Thai boxing is very different to boxing under Queensberry Rules. I may not be quite right, but as far as I can understand, practically everything is permitted except biting, holding and pulling the other fellow's hair. The boxers may kick, butt, obtain a strangle hold and thump the other fellow's face while bringing their knee up to hit him in the chin, and kidney punches and rabbit punches are not barred.

Boxing gloves are the one concession.

Before each contest begins the opponents generally kneel in the ring and pray for success whilst offering up thanks to their instructor. They then sometimes mime the coming contest in the ring. Each man will prance about separately, hitting, kicking and posing in the various fighting gestures, all in slow time, whilst a particular variety of music is played during this part of the performance. Contrary to what we had always been told, this mime is not always carried out. In fact, later, at Uboe, I attended another contest where not one of the boxers performed the celebrated dance. The praying and the mime over, the referee calls the two contestants together in the ring, puts his arm round the neck of each and all three heads touch, whilst he gives them their final instructions. He then moves out of the way, the bell rings, seconds jump out of the ring and the fight is on.

When I say the fight is on, I mean the *fight* is on. It is not boxing as we know it. The gentleman from the Blue corner will probably lash out with a swinging right, only to find Red's foot giving him a hefty blow in the chest. There is little sparring for position. The whole fight is a mixed combat of whirring arms, butting heads and kicking legs. Heavy falls are frequently taken and the referee heaves the opponents apart. A most effective knock-out is to bring the knee sharply up under the chin of your opponent as he bends forward, and one knock-out I saw was perfect in its finish; a straight left kick to the right jaw practically laid the man out and as he fell the winner's right fist came round to crash on to the point of the falling man's left jaw. He was com-



pletely and absolutely knocked out and after the referee had duly counted him out in the traditional way, he lay on the canvas twitching slightly but after several minutes did not come to. A stretcher, which was kept handy, was thrown up into the ring, the loser was rolled on to it and he was carried off, whilst the winner, after bowing to the audience jumped over the ropes and disappeared.

As the temperature is pretty hot the boxing takes place in an open-air ring at night under electric lights. Row upon row of spectators fade into the darkness and one can just discern a sea of light faces against the background of the night. Overhead millions of brilliant stars shine on the scene and all the time the band of pipes and drums plays a monotonous but fascinating tune. Two tunes only seem to be played, one during the preliminaries and miming of the boxers and one during the actual fight. The spectators yell and shout and cheer. There is no question of the referee threatening to stop the fight unless the spectators keep quiet. All contests are for five rounds of three minutes each and of the five contests that took place this evening the first ended in a normal knock-out from which the loser rapidly recovered, but the losers in the second, third and fourth contests were all carried away on stretchers, still unconscious. The last contest was one of the best and the yells of delight from the audience when Red corner managed to get Blue corner's leg firmly under his left arm whilst he proceeded to hammer him in every part of his face and body with his right fist was a thing I shall remember for many a long day. There was a slight pause whilst one of them spat out a mouthful of teeth into the ring. Then the bell went for the end of the round and whilst the seconds revived the boxers another man jumped into the ring with a dustpan and brush to sweep up the teeth.

Long before the end R. was sitting with her eyes closed and several times suggested that we might go home, but our hosts were thoroughly enjoying themselves and hints, however strong, did not penetrate their consciousness so we sat out the contest to the very end. I must say for my part

I enjoyed it thoroughly, and when I had the opportunity went to another tournament in Ubol. R. flatly refused to accompany me. It is certainly no sport for the squeamish and those who dislike bloodshed.

The one thing R. loved was to see the hot and exhausted contestants sitting on stools in their corners at the end of each round whilst their seconds pulled out the top of their drawers and poured cold water inside and then tipped more water inside their socks. Refreshing—almost shudderingly so!

Some of the announcements of forthcoming contests are couched in rather amusing words. I quote from an announcement of "The Grand Battle at Rajadamnern Stadion, Sunday, 20th February 1955", printed in English.

"2nd Event. Thong Suke Thiamkamhaeng (Red corner, 138 lb.) v. Su-Khum (Blue corner, 136 lb.). Thong Suke in the Red corner, Flashing star of Thaimprasitdh Camp—a colourful fistman with good terrific fistic treat who loves advancing style with 'Give and take' method and worshipping the 'Do or die' motto. And Su-Khum in the Blue corner, Super star of Kedsongkram Camp, he is tough aggressive kicking poisoner who loves to bang and kick opponents from gong to finish but inferior force."

I was certainly sorry not to be able to see the aggressive kicking poisoner bang and kick his opponent from gong to finish, but other things supervened. I was sorry, too, not to see Charn Thaimprasitdh "fighting agent with full of all actions and experienced in the in-fighting which always plant cut for his opponents". I think he might have won that particular contest as he was "a leading fighting wilcat of past and present whose right kicking work is very fearful to opponents because of his dangerous limb is the own referee in the ring-service."

Then there was Snerhchai Yontrakit "experienced in style advancing lead followed kick and elbow", and Pandhsak Vitheechai, "a violent dangerous tornado with terrific power of punch and kick who loves to march in and invade opponents with danger-limb and gives referee to do some

job in singing, 'One—, two—ten' into opponent's ears".

The unusual feature, as far as I was concerned, at this particular "Grand Battle" was a special ten-round contest under Queensberry Rules. I would rather like to have seen this to compare it with our own boxing, particularly as one of the contestants was known as "the Chin Breaker of Leyte".

I was told that this vicious wording was part of a campaign to frighten the other side!

Certainly, no visitor to Thailand should leave the country without seeing a Thai boxing contest. It is fast and furious and thoroughly entertaining and exciting, whilst the accompanying music haunts one for days afterwards.

We simply loved Raheng and the people, and our stay there was one of the high-lights of our journey.

Whilst we were there a fair was being held. I will not write about the fair itself, though it was full of interest. People were dancing there, not in the Thai classical style but more or less in the European ballroom style. As I do not know one step from another I will ask R. to describe it.

"Thai ballroom dancing, as we saw it in the country districts, is unlike the western style. The music is rhythmic and modern, though not played with saxophones and trumpets but with other rather high pitched wind instruments. The men and women stand in separate groups until the music starts, when the men chose their partners. The couples dance side by side round the room, bodies swaying, their feet doing a two-step. The high-light, to us, is the grace of movement, particularly of the women's hands which they move up and down in front of them, twisting and turning the wrists and fingers as in the classical dances. They must be taught from a very early age to manipulate wrists and fingers for every woman seems to possess beautiful hands and to use them gracefully and with suppleness whether dancing, speaking or merely moving objects from place to place."

The nights at Raheng were cool and quite a cold wind blew from the river so that we were much refreshed by our stay there.



## *Chapter Ten*

### *We Cross the Mountains and enter Chiang Mai in Style*

OUR next stage from Raheng to Chiang Mai was one of the tougher parts of our journey. We were now in the north of Thailand and had to take a mountain road for a long way before we reached the northern capital.

The Governor had told us that we might see elephants working and described to us a forest track down which we should turn to find them. After about twenty miles over a no worse road than usual, we turned off into a narrow track between clumps of bamboo and jungle and bumped our way slowly over the sand and grass, dodging in and out of bushes until, after about two and a half miles, we came to a teak settlement. But all the elephants had gone to Kampong Pet. We only saw an enormous accumulation of teak logs waiting to be floated down the river when the rains came and the current was strong enough. Back through the jungle we went to the road and then to our delight we met elephants padding slowly along beside the way. They stopped for us at the command of their riders and we took pictures of the great beasts.

Something made R. stoop down and look under the car and there she found oil dripping from the back axle. Hasty enquiries from the police told us that there was a depot of the Ministry of Communications at Thoen some twenty-four miles on, and so we hurried to get there in case the oil was low, as I did not know how long the axle had been dripping. Seventeen miles further on we came to a road junction with a man loitering there but no indication as to

which road we should take. I approached the man and repeated "Thoen" several times, first pointing to one road and then pointing to another. At last he appeared to understand my accent and pointed vigorously away to the left track so down this we moved looking for the depot of the highways department. At last we reached a road barrier and there seemed no possibility whatsoever of getting through. There was no diversion so I was preparing to take to the bush and find our way through when a new escort raced up to us, commanded by Captain Safedi Vaidyakula of Lampang, having with him five policemen. Whilst we tried to talk with him a Landrover load of police hurried up from Thoen and our original escort arrived in a cloud of dust. It appeared that Thoen was nearly ten miles behind us. We should have taken the right fork at the road junction. So back we went, still hurrying because of the dripping oil. Unfortunately we got behind a lorry and the choking clouds of dust were so thick that we could not see to pass but had to follow slowly, puffing and spitting, in its dusty wake. We eventually found the Ministry of Communications depot. The official in charge had heard about us and had instructions to give us all the help we needed if by chance we called on him. Three mechanics were quickly found and they proceeded to undo the packing of the back axle and fix it up again. We had not lost much oil and apparently it is a very common thing in Thailand for cars or lorries to suffer from this trouble; the high temperatures and the pounding to which the axle is subjected are the causes. Of course, all this took some time to put right, but whilst the work was done for us we sat in the shade and enjoyed our picnic lunch.

I was rather sorry for the delay of two hours as we had not come very far on our journey and still had the hardest part in front of us. Back we went to the road barrier. I had a special letter from the Ministry of Communications giving us permission to travel over this road and requesting the highway authorities to facilitate our passing over it. With this letter, backed up by two car-loads of police, the work-

men soon removed all the obstacles and put down logs to form a temporary bridge to enable us to pass. We went through and up towards the mountains of the north.

This was one of the most interesting parts of our entire journey as well as one of the most difficult. The road surface rapidly became even worse. There were frequent culverts right across the road, rocks, holes, dust and everything that the motorist dislikes. But the scenery made up for it all. As we climbed into the hills the forest grew thicker and the colouring of the leaves, which fell around us in showers, was extremely beautiful. Many of the leaves were well over a foot long and sometimes the car rustled through them like a boy shuffling his feet in the leaves of a beech wood in England. The country was well populated; there were dozens of babies everywhere and crowds of small children. Frequently whilst in Thailand we found it difficult to decide whether the person we were looking at was a boy or a young man, as most of them are small and look far younger than their age. The same thing applies to the cattle which are not much bigger than one of our half-grown calves. Some of the cows wore bamboo gongs hanging round their necks with a clapper on each side of the gong causing a bell-like note as they move about.

Gradually the road became steeper and more difficult. On this stretch from Thoen to Lee it is still under construction and from time to time we met bulldozers whilst all along this route through the mountains were hundreds of men digging at rocks and earth, felling trees and building bridges. The road in many places is simply a ledge hacked out of the side of the mountains. On one side the densely forested hills tower into the sky, on the other there is an almost vertical drop clothed with clumps of giant bamboo, teak trees and all the tropical vegetation of the north. The denseness of the jungle prevented us from seeing far down into the depths, which was comforting, and several times I took refuge in the thought that if we did slip or roll over the edge we should not go far before we were held up by the dense clumps of bamboo or the tremendous trees.



As boulders were hacked out of the mountainside they were tumbled over the edge down into the forest and little by little the narrow track was widened. We travelled round hair-pin bends continuously and did not have a straight run of a hundred yards during several hours' journey. We had to dodge round huge boulders, climb over smaller rocks or into holes. Once or twice the rocky surface gave place to loose sand through which we moved with difficulty. For nearly two and a half hours we travelled in low gear. Occasionally the track would dip at an angle of nearly 45 degrees, and having got to the bottom of a chasm would abruptly change and go upwards at the same steep angle. When we photographed the car travelling along the road it would sometimes completely disappear from view. We went over ramshackle bridges. Once or twice we had to move away from the track which was being made and find our way through the forest. It was hot. We were thirsty and there was nothing to drink, for we soon consumed the small quantity of liquid we had carried with us and here in the forests and mountains of the north we, of course, did not find the frequent wayside stands producing cold Green Spot or Coca Cola.

Gradually we climbed to the summit and started to descend. At last we came into more open country and on to something resembling a road. At last we saw a wayside police station. We went inside to get water and feeling refreshed and a little rested carried on again with the journey. The concentration and physical effort needed in motoring over the mountain track was very great and very tiring. One day, no doubt, this will be a magnificent road but that time has not yet arrived. Indeed, like most of the roads in Thailand it is still under construction and my admiration goes out to the authorities for the enormous amount of work they have done on their communications since the end of the war; a work which is at least making it possible to travel about the country, however uncomfortable it may be.

And so at last, wearily, we came to Lamphun where yet another police Landrover awaited us. The Lieutenant in

charge came up, saluted, and briefly told me to follow him. Before I could tell him that I would rather he came behind and had the dust, he had shot off into the distance. The road had improved slightly so that it was possible, though barely safe and certainly extremely uncomfortable, to travel at 40 m.p.h. However, our new escort kept going. Their horn was sounding all the time and all traffic as they approached was waved off the road or directed to a standstill at the side of the road until we had passed. We travelled like this for about fifteen miles, with all traffic stopped, the leading Landrover hooting like mad, ourselves following in a cloud of dust, and a second Landrover bringing up the rear and continuing the hooting. We charged into the city of Chiang Mai, roaring through the traffic-halted streets and pulled up before the Governor's residence. A most magnificent entry which made R. and me forget our fatigue, but it also made us speechless with laughter.

And then, of course, the inevitable anti-climax turned up. The Governor was away; no one in his house had heard of us; a smartly dressed girl disclaimed all knowledge of us and handed us back Prince Chula's letter with a disdainful air. We were dismissed and left to fend for ourselves. I am not surprised for we must have looked awful tramps in a travel-stained car and covered from head to foot in red dust, streaked with streams of perspiration which had run down our faces. However, the police took us to a rather dingy-looking hotel where no English was spoken and where I was shown a couple of dungeon-like rooms, on the ground floor for a change instead of being airily situated on stilts. I did not like the look of the place and went round to make enquiries and heard of another hotel whose name sounded like "Chinalong". I never discovered whether this was its right name or not but continued to enquire for the hotel owned by the State Railways, which, I had been told in Bangkok, was the place where we should probably stay in Chiang Mai. I explained that it was probably near the railway station and might even be a little way outside the town, but no one had heard of it so we went to the "Chinalong".

## THAILAND JOURNEY

As a matter of fact the "Chinalong" (or whatever it is) Hotel was quite comfortable. We had our usual plainly furnished room with an Ali Baba bath adjoining. In fact it was rather superior in some ways because we actually had a sit-down w.c. instead of the more usual hole in the floor.

We were very tired that night and as we had no Governor to think of and consequently no programme to carry out during our stay, we were able to bathe and lie down until we thought it time for dinner. Then we found that the hotel did not supply food and had no restaurant attached. However, one of the hotel employees offered to take us to a nearby restaurant. As we moved off towards this restaurant in the dark streets we heard a clank behind us and looking round found, about ten paces away, a faithful escort of two policemen each with his sub-machine-gun slung over his shoulder. When we reached the restaurant, the usual semi-open-air kind of place, they discreetly took up their positions outside, one at each corner where they could keep an eye on us. I never really discovered whether this constant guard was a compliment or to see that we did not get into mischief, though I prefer to think it was the former, as I am really quite sure it was.

We were somewhat flabbergasted when the waiter handed us a menu containing a list of eighty different dishes printed in script which we did not understand anyhow. Eventually we received some asparagus soup, something called fried chicken (which I don't think it was) with chipped potatoes and tea. Feeling tired we wandered back to the hotel, fell into bed and slept like logs, although our day's run had only been 196 miles. But we had been at it before dawn and it was dusk when we arrived at Chiang Mai.

Breakfast the following day was bacon and eggs and tea, but the tea was a creamy liquid, obviously almost neat Nestle's milk with a faint colouring of tea added. We sent this away and asked for ordinary tea only—no milk. This produced a jug of hot water and a powdered substance called "Nestea" of which we had never heard. Doubtless an admirable product but we did not want it. This was a





16. The Buddha at Wat Prat Njam, near Kok Katiam. The figure is about 250 feet high



17. Our car crossing a typical Thai bridge



18. Local interest in us and our car in the north-east



19. A spirit house at a bad corner of the road. These are often built to house and placate the evil spirits which cause road accidents

tea-growing country on the verges of China and we were determined to get some decent tea which we had had throughout Thailand. At last they understood and brought us the ordinary excellent Thai tea, but later it was explained to us that they thought that visitors from England would not want to drink the stuff that the Thais themselves indulged in and we had been provided with two alternatives which to their eyes were much greater luxuries. At the same time I think they were rather pleased to find that we really did enjoy the same food and drink as they enjoyed themselves.

Later in the morning, a change from our before-dawn starts, we took the car to a local garage to be greased and looked over. Next we went to make our number with the British Consulate. There are only two British Consulates in Thailand away from Bangkok, one being at Songkla in the extreme south near Malaya and the other being at Chiang Mai in the far north. Lt.-Col. Jacobs-Larkcom, the Consul, was away in the mountains but an extremely helpful Thai clerk drafted signals for us to the Governors of Chiang Rai and Lampang to advise them of a change in our route which we proposed to make.

The Ministry in Bangkok had suggested that we came back on our tracks from Chiang Mai and made for Lampang and then by a roundabout route turn north again for Chiang Rai. This we did not wish to do. We knew there was a track of some sort from Chiang Mai to Fang and thence through the mountains and forests to Chiang Rai. Everyone insisted that there was no road and that the track, as such, was quite impassable for us. Nevertheless, as the Government did not actually forbid us to make the journey, we decided to go that way.

Just as we were leaving the Consulate, Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom arrived. We went in and had drinks with her and she told us a good deal about the neighbourhood, including its leper settlement, where she had been that morning, and the zoo. Her husband apparently spent most of his time in the surrounding mountains with the hillmen. In talking



to other people I learnt that he had gained a somewhat peculiar reputation for hardiness because he always made these journeys through forest and mountain in bare feet and in fact only wore shoes at all in civilized surroundings. He had found that foot coverings caused blisters, particularly when wading through streams and climbing over rough country. His feet had hardened and he was able to travel as well and comfortably as a mountain-man.

Incidentally, Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom told us where to find the railway hotel for which I had been searching. It was actually called the Terminus Hotel and it was, as I had suspected, at the railway station some couple of miles outside the town. So on leaving the Consulate we went there for lunch and looked over the place. Certainly it was the best hotel in Chiang Mai, but we were reasonably comfortable at our "Chinalong" and decided to stay there. At the "Chinalong" we met Mr. Godfrey of the Shell Company who had been stationed in these parts for some years and knows most of the local road conditions. According to him the road from Fang to Chiang Rai was not as bad as the road from Thoen to Lee, over which we had already passed, though he was palpably surprised to hear that we had brought our car over this mountain road and at first was inclined to think we were pulling his leg. He told us that, from what he knew, if we had managed that road we could certainly get through to Chiang Rai but he warned us to look out for tigers as it was a tiger-infested country.

That afternoon, collecting our car from the garage, we were stopped by a man who said that he had been sent by the Governor to look after us. He tried to explain that he had looked for us the previous day and all that morning had been trying to find us but had arrived at each place after we had left. We took his word for it, thanked him and said there was nothing he could do as the police were already doing every possible thing for us. He added that the Governor had reserved three rooms for us in the first hotel that we had visited and that the hotel people had made a muddle because of a misunderstanding.

There is so much to see and do in Chiang Mai and the vicinity that during our stay there we had insufficient time to see everything. But we did visit the Wat Doi Sutep, some 3,000 feet up in the mountains about fifteen miles outside the town, going with the police in their Landrover. The approach was a terrific climb over an appalling surface and when at last we arrived at the foot of the very long staircase leading up to the temple our hearts failed us. Two enormous dragons, swallowing seven-headed serpents, formed the finial of the stone balustrades of this staircase, and as we looked upwards there seemed an infinite number of the steep high steps common to the country disappearing almost into the cloudy distance before they reached the temple itself. I am sure it was a very fine temple and I am quite certain that we should have made the effort required to climb up these innumerable steep steps in the blazing heat of the afternoon sun, but the fact remains that we did not. We took pictures of the dragons swallowing serpents and then we turned round and bumped down the mountainside once more.

More police had kept an eye on our car at the garage (it was not ready when we called for it after lunch) and a mechanic was still doing things to it as he had discovered that the back axle was still leaking slightly. It was the police who offered us the use of their Landrover to take us to the Consulate where we were due for tea with Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom. Unfortunately the Landrover was hot and tired too and would not start. We were already late and as we were close to the hotel I phoned Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom and told her why we were late. She at once said she would come and collect us and I went back to the Landrover and explained to our police captain and R. that the consulate car was coming for us. The effect on the police was amazing; they almost burst into tears and implored us not to desert them and their Landrover. They said they would make it start somehow but that we must let them take us to the Consulate. R. and I could not help laughing when we saw how serious they were and how hurt their pride was at our

suggestion. I compromised and explained that Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom was coming for us, so that if we met her I must get out of their car and join her, this, of course, providing that the Landrover would indeed start. I think most of the neighbourhood were turned out to push, and down the main street of Chiang Mai went the Landrover laden with police, R. and myself, doing a steady five or six miles an hour through the united efforts of some twenty man-power. At last there was a terrific explosion and the Landrover shuddered and almost leapt into the air and rushed off in a cloud of dust and noise under its own power. Smiles from the police and delighted explanations that their car only needed a rest. Then I saw the consular Vauxhall coming towards us. I asked them to halt and I jumped out to stop Mrs. Jacobs-Larkcom who was making for our hotel. I explained again what had happened and she laughingly agreed to wait whilst I crossed the road to the Landrover and collected R. But the police were adamant. No! I could go in the consular car as they quite realized that I must not be rude to my hostess, but R. was in the police car and the police themselves would deposit her safely at the Consulate. And so it happened. I went in the Vauxhall, R. went in the Landrover, everyone was happy, "face" was saved and the delighted police disappeared as we went in to tea.

I have not space to tell of the wonderful enamelware made in Chiang Mai, the silk which is woven from the cocoons of the worms which feed on the local mulberry trees in the surrounding mountains, nor have I space to write of the flowers but I must mention the masses of double jerbera which grow here and, indeed, over all the country. The single jerbera, so esteemed in England, is almost despised as a weed; the double blossom is worthy of a garden, although I myself prefer the single bloom! Also I must describe the consular water-wheel for the thing that had caught my eye when we first went to the consulate was the amazingly lovely green lawns surrounding the building. The consulate sits on the banks of the river Ping and beside it is the water-wheel. This is built entirely of bamboo without a single nail



in its entire structure. The paddles are of bamboo slats, the spokes of stout bamboos. The hub is a piece of very large bamboo and all the fastenings are made with strips of cane. Round the circumference of the wheel are hollow bamboo pipes set at a slight angle so that as the force of the stream working on the paddles turns the water-wheel, the hollow bamboos fill with water which is retained inside them on the upward turn of the wheel owing to the angle at which they are set. When they reach the top of the wheel and therefore become horizontal the water pours out, the jet being caught in a trough. And so there is a constant series of jets of water pouring from the bamboos set around the wheel and as the trough fills the water is led away in more hollow bamboos, bored with holes at frequent intervals and led over the lawns and gardens of the Consulate. It is an easy matter to move these bamboo pipes as and when required and the result is a lovely oasis of flowers and green turf in an otherwise rather burnt up countryside.

We had a new noise that night. Usually it was the countless barking dogs which gave us restless nights, but on this occasion someone patrolled the street beating a wooden gong at intervals. One could hear him approaching from the distance, the beat becoming louder under our windows and gradually dying away again only to start once more a short time later. In the morning the police told us this was the town watchman going round the town beating on bamboo gongs to notify everybody that he was awake and guarding the town. I suppose one gets used to it and sleeps whilst the watchman watches.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### *The Jungle Road to Chiang Rai*

WHEN we left Chiang Mai early in the morning the thermometer only registered 68° F. People were just beginning to appear in the town, the women wearing much brighter coloured clothing than further south and having long hair. Many of them wrapped bath towels round their shoulders for warmth at this early hour. Even at 7.30 a.m. the temperature in the car was only 64° F.

We soon ran into dense forest with a fairly good surface to the road which climbed in and about the hills beside the river Ping. After a time we were travelling in mist or low clouds but as the sun rose these dispersed and by the time we reached Chiang Dow, where we stopped to take pictures, the day was already heating up.

Whilst we wandered about in Chiang Dow a Landrover with six armed policemen came up and said they had been ordered to escort us to Chiang Rai. They then shot ahead and vanished in the distance.

The air in the hills was lovely and fresh, the streams sparkling and clear, making cheerful noises as they rippled over and round the stones. Birds were singing. Many trees were covered with apple-like blossom, pale mauve and pink flowers bloomed on the vines which climbed over the boughs. Teak, palm trees of various sorts, and giant bamboos grew in profusion, white, red, purple and orange leaves all helped to make a most delightful and colourful picture. Later the autumn-tinted leaves would, of course, give place to the fresh green of spring which was not far away. Meanwhile, we climbed more into the hills through tall flowering grasses covered with blue convolvulus. Patches of the ground

were covered with flowers like giant periwinkles. From time to time we came to huts made of bamboo matting set on stilts and the road began to zigzag upwards into the densely forested hills. Country bullock carts painted bright colours, with elephants carved on the back, passed continuously along this part of the road and in the grazing at the edge of the forest were cattle tied by a rope to the end of a long pole pivoted between two uprights with a counter-weight at the shorter end. This enables the beast to graze easily and to increase its radius, whilst the further it tries to move away the greater is the pressure from the raised counter-weighted end of the pole.

Before we reached the turning near Fang our ashtray fell off. By this time practically everything at all loose on the car had jolted off. Our radio packed up on the second day out, the overdrive followed suit the day after, and then one by one everything that was not an integral part of the car worked loose and fell off with a clatter. Our compass had long since gone and we steered on occasion by a pocket compass taken out on to the road. Indeed, it is a wonder to me that the car itself kept going after the roads over which it had already carried us, though the present one was reasonably good.

The houses in every village were smothered in bougainvillea, not the common puce variety but of lovely roses and reds, of brick colour, white, pale purple and mauve. I have never seen so many different colours of bougainvillea in any other country.

The road surface from Chiang Mai to Fang was the best we had found, except from Bangkok to Lopburi, and we drove along happily in these early morning hours watching the sights of the countryside as the temperature gradually stoked up. Then we came to a signpost. It was a real king of a signpost with about half a dozen different arms, some pointing in the direction we were going, some down the road over which we had just come and one solitary little arm pointing to a narrow, loose gravel road which went off to the right.



Fang was only a few miles ahead, but here we left the road and turned on to the track which was eventually to take us to Chiang Rai. It was a very narrow trail not much wider than the car. The surface was loose gravel and much of the time grass grew along the middle of the road leaving two thin tracks for the wheels to run in. Even this gave out every now and again and we had to make a detour through the jungle, usually a sandy path going over hummocks and boulders, winding in and out through the giant bamboos and apparently leading us deeper and deeper into the dense forest. This was tiger country and though we had no fear of being attacked we kept our eyes open in the hope of seeing one of the big beasts. Eventually the forest track would bring us back on to the road. Down would plunge the road at an angle of 45 degrees and then up again as steeply. Sometimes we went through shallow streams or over bridges built only of matting and not intended for such vehicles as we were driving. Through this matting our wheels generally broke and we splashed and banged over the riverbed tearing the matting to shreds. Occasionally the bridge would be a little stronger and higher over the river, a rickety construction of bamboos which bent, cracked and rustled as we went over so that I made R. and the police who were with us get out to decrease the weight.

About midday we decided to stop for a picnic lunch and pulled in beside the track in a lovely spot where dense clumps of bamboos, six inches or more in diameter, towered forty or fifty feet into the air, their feathery fronds showing delightful speckles of silver and gold as the wind caused them to tremble and rustle in the bright sunshine. Among the bamboos the giant trees of the north towered towards the sky. Huge, thick cobwebs festooned many of the lower plants showing the presence of innumerable spiders of a type which I could not identify.

The officer and policeman who were in the car with us did not like our decision to stop but they jumped out and inspected the track ahead and behind and walked into the jungle around us, revolver and machine-gun at the ready.

They were obviously relieved when the Landrover which we thought we had lost caught up with us, carrying another officer and five more armed police. These spread out in a perimeter around us and kept guard faithfully while we ate. None of them would partake of our food although one of them accepted a drink of water. We found this quite a usual thing. Whilst on duty with us our guards would very rarely eat. Occasionally they did lunch with us but generally they made an excuse that they preferred their own type of food. Our necessary excursions after lunch produced rather more excitement than usual and the guards who accompanied us were obviously on the look out for danger.

Here we were very close indeed to the Burmese frontier and just over this strip of Burma lay south China. Possibly it was a dangerous part of the country for the bad men of three countries collected there. Also, as I have said, it was supposed to be infested with tigers.

After lunch the "road" became much more difficult. During the morning it had been bumpy and sandy and steep and the bridges rickety but by driving slowly and carefully we got along without any trouble. But in the afternoon for over two hours we had hairpin bends every twenty yards; the diversions into and through the jungle and forest became even more frequent and rougher; the ups and downs were steeper and longer. On the track there was barely room for one car, with the bamboo clad mountains rising on our right to a great height and on the left dropping into the distance, veiled in clumps of giant bamboo. Some of these bamboos are a good eight inches thick and at least fifty feet high. Among them grow enormous teak trees. Twice, without warning and without signs of any life at all being in the neighbourhood, we were stopped by an enormous bulldozer working its way along the hillside, playing its part in making the road through to Chiang Rai. We had to wait whilst rocks and debris were cleared and the bulldozer found a place where it could edge into a curve in the mountainside and give us room to creep by. Once in climbing from the bottom of a ravine up a long 45-degree slope we stuck in the

sand on a bend. I made my passengers get out, reversed down the hill again (the sand was so thick that the car would not run backwards of its own accord even at this steep gradient) and then with showers of sand and grit spurting from the rear wheels climbed to the top and round the bend to a level place. The radiator boiled and clouds of steam came from under the bonnet so we got a section of bamboo and filled it with water at a handy stream and poured it into the radiator after giving it a chance to cool down a little. Twice our policemen removed fallen trunks of bamboo from our path and we were extremely grateful for their help, for though we could have done the work for ourselves we were tired, the temperature was very high and physical labour had by that time become offensive. All round us dense jungle and forest closed right in to the edge of the track. We could see a few yards ahead and a few behind but barely a yard on either side.

When we stopped to change drivers and R. took over on a particularly bad stretch of the road, our two police looked terrified and clutched the back of the front seat. I glanced round at them and told them there was no need to worry for R. was quite a good driver, but they hung on grimly and it was some time before they partially relaxed. Then I took over again and an hour later R. resumed the driving seat. This time, as she climbed in behind the wheel, the police captain leant forward and patted her on the shoulder.

"You good driver," he said, putting out his fist with one thumb raised into the air.

"No," said the police sergeant, "You *very* good driver," and stuck both thumbs in the air. After that we were all happy and shortly afterwards got out of the mountains and on to a rather broader and easier track, where we found a complete lorry-load of police from Chiang Rai awaiting us. They were certainly taking no chances along this part of the road. The lorry could not get into the mountainous jungle through which we had made our way. It had come as far as it could and was prepared to send a dozen police armed with sub-machine-guns along the track to search for us if we



had been much longer in appearing. It was certainly amazing how well we were guarded during the whole of the time we were in any of the sticky parts of the country.

And so, an hour or so later, we came into Chiang Rai, weary and hot but with the car all in one piece and running well. We had accomplished what everybody had told us was impossible and brought our car through from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai over the mountain track. One day this will be a very fine and very lovely road, but I hate to think of the day when any car can run over it with ease at any time—it was much more fun to do it as we did.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### *We Miss the Crocodiles but Find Elephants*

THE Governor of Chiang Rai had not forgotten us and we found ourselves taken to the Sanongsouk Hotel where a tiny bungalow in the grounds was allocated to us with another nearby for our large escort of police who also overflowed into one or two rooms in the hotel. The bungalow, on stilts as usual, consisted of only a small bedroom with the adjoining Ali Baba bathroom, etc., and a tiny veranda, just large enough for a small table and a couple of chairs where we could sit for our meals. We decided to have our food straight away and go to bed as we were very tired. A dinner of soup, with a charcoal heater through the centre of the soup bowl and containing lumps of chicken, mushrooms and cauliflower, a dish of fish, an unknown Chinese mixture, rice and Thai tea were all served together. We ate it gratefully and went to bed.

The following morning we awoke to the strains of "A Bicycle Made For Two" coming over a loudspeaker nearby. I do not know whether this was a local joke indicating that they thought this might be a more suitable vehicle than our car, but we were frequently astonished throughout Thailand by the popularity of British tunes, particularly the older ones which had some music to them.

Immediately I stuck my head outside the bungalow door a small boy trotted across the compound with a large jug of hot water for washing. He was followed up by a slightly larger girl struggling with an enormous bucket of boiling water so that we might bath in comfort. The effect was slightly spoiled when the small girl tripped and spilled the water over the veranda but it was immediately mopped up and

another bucket carried in. This was the first and only time in the whole of our journey in Thailand that this was done for us and indeed a request for a jug of hot water which we made once or twice was usually received in incredulous amazement, though we always received what we asked for after an appropriate interval.

The air was sharp for we were well up in the hills and we were glad to wear woolly jackets over our thin clothes when we sat down on our veranda for breakfast.

I may add that when leaving this friendly and pleasant place I was presented with a bill for the use of two bungalows, one for ourselves and one for the police, one large room for the odd policemen and food for eight. The total bill came to about £3. 15s. 0d.!

Police Lieutenant Sophon Singhaphalin, a smiling cheerful officer who had been with us for several days, was a very tiny man who perhaps looked even smaller as the northern Thais were fairly tall. He spoke only a little English but indicated that before we left Chiang Rai we must visit the hospital as it was the best in all the north of the country. He introduced us to Dr. Sompong who was in charge. The hospital, which was built in 1937, has beds for eighty-five patients in several blocks corresponding to the different wards of a hospital in England. There were five doctors and surgeons and we were escorted round by Dr. Sompong who told us a good deal about health in general in Thailand. Suddenly he opened a door and ushered us in before we had time to see what was happening.

"This is the operating theatre," he explained.

Indeed it was and a major operation was in full progress. The patient lay stretched on the table and to our horrified glances most of his interior anatomy appeared to be lying about loose. The surgeon continued the operation and the nurses, after glancing up, went on with the job and paid no more attention to us. I backed out hastily and nearly fell over R. who was making noises as though she was going to be sick in the operating theatre. The police who followed us round were highly amused and rushed in to take our places



to see the operation. We got out safely but I could not help thinking that the visit was a bit casual. We had lost Lt. Sophon but as Dr. Sompong said good-bye to us the police officer came out of a small office near the entrance smiling broadly and as we turned away we saw two extremely pretty girls waving good-bye from the window. Then, of course, we realized why we had to visit the hospital and I am afraid our escort was ragged mercilessly for the rest of the time he was with us, a ragging he always took in perfectly good part.

About twenty-four miles south of Chiang Rai we stopped to look at a well of almost boiling water beside the road. It was too hot for the hand, perfectly clear and there were green deposits on the overflow from the spring. It had no smell but I am afraid I did not taste it. Neither could I get any details from Lt. Sophon other than the fact that its name sounded rather like "wayside cow".

We only had a short run that morning as we wanted to stop for the night at Payow, as we had been told that there was a huge lake of great importance to the Fisheries Board, which was infested with crocodiles. I was somewhat puzzled to know why the Fisheries Board had established a big station in a lake infested with crocodiles which live largely on fish. The Deputy Sheriff, who looked after us here, this not being the seat of a Governor, laughed at me when I said I would like to get some pictures of the crocodiles for there were none there and he was extremely puzzled about my information. He seemed rather taken aback when we said we were staying the night and had an animated conversation in Thai with one of his assistants, who then vanished, whilst he kept us in conversation. After a time the assistant returned and we were taken to a resthouse-cum-hotel and duly installed with apologies for its inadequacies, though it was really quite comfortable.

The Deputy Sheriffs have one of the most interesting jobs in Thailand. They are the lowest grade of government officials appointed directly by the Ministry in Bangkok and correspond to the District Officers in our Colonial Service. The Deputy Sheriff is responsible for the affairs of his ampur,

a district of the chungwad or province over which presides the Governor. His jobs are many and varied. He has to have some legal knowledge, indeed many of the Deputy Sheriffs are barristers, but he also has to undertake tours in the bush country, visiting the remote villages to watch over the welfare of the people and to apprehend any criminals who may be fleeing from justice. Like our colonial District Officer he travels light, taking his camp equipment with him. These are the men who really know the wilds of Thailand. Several from whom I enquired told me that there was very little want or real poverty in the country, one going so far as to say that the only request for help that he ever received in his district was for the provision of radio sets for the villages.

Tat Karonram, the Deputy Sheriff, took us in hand and showed us the fisheries station where eggs and small fish from the ponds around Bangkok are grown on and then released in the large lake at the edge of the town. All about were masses of double jerbera and roses, of which they were very proud.

The lake itself is an enormous expanse of placid water with low hills on the far side. It was not particularly beautiful in the daylight but Tat Karonram asked us to come to the lake with him in the evening and promised us a glorious sunset.

As Payow is only a tiny place with nothing of very much interest, we rested for the afternoon until the Deputy Sheriff called for us again to accompany us once more to the lake. In the cool of the evening all the people and children and the dogs had assembled along the lakeside. Bathing parties were in progress, men, women and children, partially clad, swimming and splashing about until they emerged and changed from their wet to dry clothes in some mysterious and extremely modest manner. Of course the clothing worn was very simple but it always intrigued us to watch people making these changes and to wonder how they did it. Everyone was interested in us and through the Deputy Sheriff talked with us in a friendly way. The children of course were curious and rather amused and even the dogs

regarded us not so much with suspicion as with an air of wondering what the queer smell was. Many of the Thai dogs are quite nice looking animals, usually brown in colour (not the lemon yellow of the typical pi dog) and in build and size not unlike a smooth-coated Irish terrier. Unfortunately some of the poor beasts were mangy or half starved and nearly all of them seemed to have immoderate quantities of fleas, by the amount of scratching that went on. From time to time half a dozen of them would burst into violent quarrels and dust would fly in all directions as they raced at one another and engaged in a tumbling scrap, but as quickly as it started so it died down and all was peaceful once more. Most of the dogs had an alert and friendly air and both of us took a great fancy to them. Here in the north people shook hands with one another instead of placing the hands together before the face and bowing slightly. Generally speaking, too, the people were considerably taller and bigger-built than they were further south.

Gradually the daylight faded as the sun sank behind the hills on the far side of the lake. We stood and waited for the glorious colours of the eastern sunset but all that happened was that the light faded rapidly away until we were left in darkness with an apologetic sheriff who wondered why his glorious sunset had deserted him on that night in particular.

We had a number of films and letters to post and so went to the post office. Payow being only a small town had only a small post office and our efforts to post films by registered airmail and ordinary letters and postcards to England and other parts of the world upset the staff completely. They were pleasant and helpful as usual but had no idea what the postage should be. They tried to turn up the rates in various documents and at last confessed that as far as they knew they had never had any letters to post to foreign parts and would much rather we tried in a larger place, which later we did. I mention this, not in a tone of criticism, but merely to show who out of the world were some of these places at which we stopped in Thailand.

We must have made many bad mistakes and uncon-



sciously been rude to many people in many different ways during our journey, but never once did anyone show that we had behaved in an extraordinary manner or do anything but smile in a pleasant way and do their best to help us. "Never mind", was the only term of reproach, if reproach it was, that we ever heard, and if anything could not be done for any reason or any snags cropped up this was the invariable comment. In so many respects the attitude of mind in Thailand is so very similar to that of the people of my own county of Cornwall.

We did not have a very restful night owing to the barking of many dogs and the noise of the cocks which crowed all night around us. We were glad to rise before dawn and receive our breakfast of four tiny bantams' eggs, very lightly boiled, toast thickly buttered and covered with sugar, cake and condensed milk slightly coloured with tea. It was cool, the temperature being only 60° F.

We left early as we hoped to see elephants working at Ngao.

Not long after leaving Payow we came to an acute bend in the road descending a steep hill. If taken too fast it would be very simple indeed for the car to go over the edge and roll down the hillside into the forest, a thing made particularly easy by the loose surface on which the tyres skidded constantly. On this turn was an absolute forest of spirit houses, the tiny models of which I have already spoken, each on its own pole. These were erected by lorry drivers and others using the road, to ensure that the spirits of the locality had ample dwelling places and had no cause whatsoever to vent their spite on the unfortunate drivers who had to travel on this dangerous stretch of road. There was also a spirit tree, said to be the home of numbers of these ghostly characters, but though this was growing in a somewhat awkward position no one dared to cut it down or injure it in any way lest it became altogether impossible to negotiate the hill in safety.

Captain Safedi, who had been in charge of our escort to Chiang Mai, picked us up again half way between Payow

and Ngao and told us that arrangements had been made with the manager of the Anglo-Thai Corporation (Mr. E. G. S. Hartley) to show us the elephants. Ngao was only a few miles from Payow and we were taken to the offices of the corporation just on the edge of the town, where Mr. Hartley and his wife received us.

We thought our reception was not quite as friendly as the one usually accorded us by the Thais but put it down to British reserve, until we discovered (a) that R. was not expected and had never been heard of, (b) that I was expected the previous night and a bungalow had been specially made ready for me, and (c) breakfast had waited for us for several hours and had then been removed. After explanations the atmosphere thawed and the Hartleys proved to be the kindest people imaginable. I never quite discovered how the muddle had occurred as no one had mentioned to us that we were not expected to stay at Payow and the Deputy Sheriff had obviously been far too polite to say that we were not expected there, though I was a little bit puzzled at the trouble he seemed to have in fixing us up for the night. However, we were very happy with him, though sorry not to have spent the night at Ngao.

Here, at last, I was able to obtain a most important piece of information for which I had been enquiring all over Thailand without success. The vital Test Match, which would settle the question of the Ashes between Australia and England had been played, but during the whole of our tour we did not see a single paper nor hear a single English broadcast. The Thais do not play cricket and despite my enquiries at every place at which we stopped I could not find out who had won. Fortunately Mrs. Hartley is a cricket enthusiast and not only was able to tell that England had retained the Ashes but gave me an almost ball to ball commentary on the whole of the match. I wonder what any of our Thai friends would have made of it had they been present.

We were first taken down to the bungalow that had been got ready and that lay about 150 yards away from the Hartley's

own residence. Hot water was brought for a bath and we were given a chance to refresh ourselves whilst a fresh breakfast was cooked. After bacon and eggs in the English way toast and marmalade and in fact all the things that we had forgotten about as a normal breakfast, we were taken to see the elephants.

We went in Mr. Hartley's Landrover through the teak forest down to the river and then walked along the bank to a spot where the flow of water had been dammed and some 10,000 teak logs worth about £200,000 had been accumulated prior to floating them down the river, forming them into rafts and eventually fetching up at Bangkok. Of course, the river was low and many of the logs were lying about on the sloping bank above the level of the water. First stakes and hurdles were pulled from the river bed to make a gap about six feet wide in the dam through which the water poured in a torrent. Elephants, their riders sitting on their necks, then selected a log from the mass collected above the dam and pushed it with feet or trunks to the rushing torrent of the gap. There the water took control and the enormous log shot through the open sluice and floated off down stream where other elephants at intervals guided it safely on its way and cleared the jams as they occurred. One big fellow with a fine pair of tusks seemed particularly intelligent and when an extra large log was stranded in the mud he bent his knees till he was almost kneeling on the river bed, fixed the points of his two tusks at the butt of the log and pushed, following it up through the mud until it was floating safely in the stream and was taken over by another of these intelligent beasts to pass along the floating mass. We stood there for an hour or more watching the elephants in the water or climbing carefully down the steep banks to do their share of the work.

Contrary to the popular opinion, elephants are not very hard-working beasts and they suffer from the heat. Generally speaking they work for four days then rest for three days and on their work days they only work in the morning, after which they are turned out into the forest to feed themselves.



Their legs are tied loosely together and hobbled thus they can move about but do not stray too far away as they have to be rounded up each morning. They breed naturally when turned loose in the forest like this. All of them have their own names and answer to them like human beings, though they will only do their best work when regularly attended by the same man. They start heavy work when they are seventeen or eighteen years old but at sixty they are generally retired apart from all but the lightest tasks. They are in their prime both with regards to docility and work between the ages of thirty and forty-five. A trained elephant is worth about £500.

Each kind of elephant has a different description: a male elephant is a poo; a tuskless male is a poosadaw; a single-tusker a pooake; but the male with the full glory of two tusks remains simply a poo.

It is not only teak that grows in these forests of the north. There are numerous other trees, all having their uses, such as the maipadoo, maidang, maipao, maitakien and maipoocy. The prefix mai means tree.

Teak trees, one of the hardest and most valuable woods in the world, grows very fast at first and then extremely slowly. The result is that the heart wood is soft and useless and many trunks are hollow. It is the outer wood which provides the timber which is so valuable. The logs are felled in the forest in the wet season and dragged down by elephants and thrown into the river behind dams such as I have described.

Mr. Hartley, who served with the R.A.F. in Burma and India during the war, told me that the concession to the Anglo-Thai Corporation would expire shortly and he had no idea what would be the future of the vast organization built up to deal not only with teak but to carry on trade and business relations between Thailand and Great Britain. Doubtless some arrangement will be made by the Thai Government. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hartley with two small children is not looking forward to life in England and all that means under present conditions, after living in the peace

and restfulness of Thailand where domestic help is plentiful and life moves at an altogether slower and happier pace.

We had lunch and were then taken over again by Thais, who led us immediately to a teak nursery nearby to show us the process of growing these trees from seed. When the seedlings are a year old they are pulled up, the trunks cut off and all the side shoots trimmed. The remaining roots, like extremely hard radishes about six inches long, are then planted out in an appropriate place as part of a reafforestation scheme.

From the nursery the District Officer took us to a particularly holy cave at Pha Thai. Of course it was situated on the side of a mountain and we climbed up and up in the heat of the afternoon, over tumbled rock and roughly hewn steps, until, after what seemed an age, we came to the entrance and plunged down into semi-darkness. Inside were stalactites and stalagmites, one of the latter being regarded with particular reverence as it was said to have a holy cobra coiled on top of it. I did not climb up to see.

We came out from the coolness of the cave to the searing sunlight and baking heat and commenced to climb down. R. and a police officer went down ahead. I came down slowly with most of the party who had joined us, carrying the ciné camera and stopping to take pictures. Through constant climbing over rock and dry gravel the soles of my shoes were shiny and slippery, with the inevitable result that at one stage both my feet shot out from under me and I came down with an almighty crash in the rocks. My effort to save the ciné camera was successful but at the expense of practically all the skin off my forearms and a tremendous bruise on my behind, which for several weeks afterwards was all the colours of the rainbow. The two policemen and all the others who were with me were most worried and obviously relieved when I got to my feet and resumed the climb down, though they hovered near with outstretched hands all the time, obviously expecting to take me in their arms if I again fell down the mountainside.

At the bottom green coconuts were awaiting us. Someone had observed how hot we were after climbing up and had

thoughtfully sent a workman up one of the coconut palms for our refreshment. In countless ways like this we found our Thai friends invariably thoughtful and careful for our comfort and pleasure. When one is really hot there is nothing like the cool milk of a green coconut. The husk and top of the shell are lopped off with a large sharp knife and then an inserted straw or a drink straight from the hole is one of the grandest things I know in a hot country.

And so on to Lampang where we stayed at the Rom Sri Hotel, a most curious place with a labyrinth of ground floor rooms and offices, the kitchen and restaurant and upstairs the rooms on different levels separated from one another by partitions going two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. They overlooked the offices and courtyard below where, through open windows, the various people assembled could see everything that went on inside the bedrooms. There were many geckos chattering about on the walls and ceilings here. The landlord spoke English and was most attentive, gave us a good meal and sent us happily to bed. It was only when we were leaving that we found that R., again, had not been expected and only a single room had been kept for me. Another guest, who had somehow heard of us, knew we were two, and had kindly given up his double room so that we might be comfortable.



### *Chapter Thirteen*

## *Sukhothai and Pitsanulok*

FROM Lampang we had to make our way south again to Raheng, though we did not join our northward road until we reached Thoen at the south end of the difficult mountain road over which we had passed when going to Chiang Mai.

From time to time in this section of the country we saw plantations of sugar cane and stopped to watch these giant grasses being cut and carried off to the mills.

As usual, there was no shade, no village or restaurant, no refreshing Green Spot and in fact nowhere to stop in comfort to eat our lunch until we came to a wayside police station standing on its stilts beside the road. Here, at Nok Kathung, we took our folding chairs from the car on to the veranda and ate our picnic lunch in comfort and then indulged in a short siesta, the first time we had done this, but now, after many days travelling over difficult country, we were beginning to tire. I have come to the conclusion that journeys like these are jobs for young men and not for an elderly or middle-aged couple!

We arrived at Raheng in the afternoon and found the Governor had gone to Pitsanulok and the telegrams about our arrival had not turned up till after his departure. The resthouse where we had stayed so happily on our way north was at once opened up for us, a cook produced and the nice old dog who presided over the establishment welcomed us as old friends. As we had not been expected no sightseeing had been arranged for us. We had seen Raheng and so did not have to go rubber-necking in the town. We could rest in comfort in the house beside the river or potter in the town as we felt inclined. I had been suffering from tummy trouble

for a few days in addition to having been shaken up pretty thoroughly by my fall on the mountainside and the rest was what I needed to put me right again to continue the journey.

Once more a little incident occurred which we shall not forget. I mentioned casually to Police Lt. Sophon, who was still with us, that I had left our folding mirror behind at Payow and had been looking for one in Raleng but had not been able to buy one as we did not know the Thai word for mirror. He gave us the right word but we said we would not go back to the shops as the matter was not urgent. About half an hour later one of the policemen turned up with a much better mirror than the one we had lost and when we thanked him and Lt. Sophon for getting it for us and asked how much we owed them they completely refused to tell us and would not let us pay anything. Nor, as usual, would the police accept a tip or a present; nothing but our thanks.

An excellent dinner was served by a woman and two small children. We sent the children to the shops to buy Green Spot for us to drink and on their return gave them a couple of bhats (about 8d.). This they at once returned to us, quite definitely but quite pleasantly refusing to accept a tip for their help. Fortunately we had with us some brooches and ornaments and other small gifts so that R. was able to pin a brooch on to each of the children's frocks. With this they were delighted and kept coming back to thank us very prettily with their hands together and bowing before us.

It was here that I noticed that a number of the police officers and government officials wore the nail of the little finger grown to what we should regard as an immoderate length, well over half an inch long, very carefully cut, pointed and polished. Later we noticed this in other places, an indication of the fact that the wearer was not engaged in manual labour, a slight sign of superiority and social position. Lt. Sophon, who was with us a good deal, was only about five feet tall and told us that he weighed a little over six stone. On the other hand, his constable was tall and heavily built. These people with their tiny, neat features, had waists so small that I am sure I could span most of them with the

fingers of my two hands, but their efficiency and kindness was not in proportion to their size.

The nights at Raheng were cool and this time it was quiet, so that after our rest both of us felt refreshed and well and ready for the next stage of the journey to Pitsanulok.

I have long ceased to comment very much on the roads. They were all bad and some were worse than others; corrugations, potholes, and dust were the worst features. Frequent deviations through the scrub, forest or jungle beside the road, due to repairs to bridges, were even worse and I marvel to-day (as do most Thais!) that our car ever got through.

As far as Sukhothai, the old capital of the northern kingdom of the Thais, we went through thick bush and low trees. It was one of the most deserted roads we had travelled on. There were no villages, just occasional patches of banana or sugar cane and from time to time small gangs of men and women working on the roads. Though the surfaces in Thailand are bad, work is going on constantly, although it seems to me very largely a wasted effort to dump dust from the roadside on to the surface and sweep the dust into the depressions simply for it to be thrown out in clouds by the first vehicle which comes along.

For the first thirty-two miles, to Lan Hoi, we saw practically no traffic—one policeman on a bicycle, two herds of buffaloes and one lorry, made up the total. After Lan Hoi we had to drive more slowly than usual and arrived at the site of the old town of Sukhothai with something like relief.

We left the car to inspect the ruins. They were really very ruinous ruins though the surroundings were lovely. All round, the bright crimson blossoms of the flame of the forest showed brilliantly against the dull blue of the sky. Many birds were singing and near the principal temple was a large pond covered with lovely pink lilies.

We got into conversation with a Thai who spoke perfect English, like ourselves a visitor to the place and hung about with cameras, looking the perfect tourist, as I am afraid we did. Why one should be ashamed of looking like a tourist I



do not quite know but it always seems a thing for which to apologize! I suppose this is becoming one of the jokes of our language. Our acquaintance told us a lot about the history of the place and various temples, one of which, over a thousand years old, was being restored. There were masses of stone columns still standing and in the middle was the usual enormous figure of Buddha, though this one was covered in scaffolding owing to the restoration in progress.

The present town of Sukhothai (or Tani) was just over twenty miles further on and owed its existence to the fact that the old site suffered from a lack of water. The new town is situated on a sizeable river, though in many places this river and indeed many of them about the country, is choked with water hyacinth, which was introduced from Java by one of the princes of the royal family less than a hundred years ago. It is a beautiful plant with its refreshingly green leaves and pale mauve spikes of handsome blossoms, but it has spread so rapidly that it has entirely choked many of the waterways of the country and endless labour is entailed keeping channels open and navigable for boats which pass up and down the rivers.

This part of Thailand was thick with flame of the forest trees all profusely covered in brilliant blooms, though the green leaves had not yet appeared. The masses of violent colour against the brown background of the forest and dried up vegetation was sometimes startling in its intensity and gave the appearance of immense conflagrations among the shrivelled herbage.

A party of police awaited us at Sukhothai and took us to the local hotel. From the street I could not pick out the actual hotel building from the jumble of open-fronted shops which made up the neighbourhood and so left R. in the car whilst I was taken through a shop on the ground floor and upstairs to the hotel. This was the only place at which I jibbed on our journey. We have slept in far worse places in many parts of the world but now I am getting older and possibly more fastidious I like comfort if I can get it and the present hotel was quite the worst place in which it had been

suggested we stay in the whole of Thailand. The room was tiny and for the first time there was no bathroom. When I asked for a place to wash I was shown a rather muddled up store-room at the end of the corridor, something like a housemaid's pantry with all the cleaning materials of the hotel littering it and a half empty Ali Baba in the corner.

I said we would go on to Pitsanulok thirty-five miles further on. The police smiled and said they thought we should do so and the Governor was expecting us at Pitsanulok, where we duly arrived at the modern Asia Hotel, the Governor and some of his staff being there to welcome us. They saw us safely into our very pleasant room and left us to bathe and change, saying they would see us later.

Cleaned and refreshed we went to the Wat Phra Sri Mahathatu. This temple was one of the most unusual which we saw in the whole of Thailand and in many ways one of the most beautiful from the outside. There was the usual gabled roof with its coloured tiles and fine carvings and decorations, but behind rose a most extraordinarily shaped prang or pagoda, almost like an elongated rugby football and highly gilded so that it flashed and glittered in the sunlight. The interior was pleasant but not outstanding, though it had a very fine Buddha on what we should call the altar. On either side of the entrance and in cloisters were long lines of gilded Buddhas. I did not count them but there must have been twenty or thirty on either side and with their bright, clean gold work they were most effective. In the porch was a man playing the ranad ek or xylophone, made of strips of bamboo. He sat cross-legged in front of this playing away with wooden hammers, the tops of which were bound about with cotton.

As I have mentioned, the Buddha is exceptionally fine and there is a rather interesting story connected with it. After the Thais came south from Yunnan and founded Sukhothai, their first capital, they moved to the site of Pitsanulok which became the royal city. One of the kings decided to cast three images of Buddha to combine all the best characteristics of the style of that period. The statues were to serve as visible

enblems of the unity of the artistic and religious ideals of the people. The images were cast in metal and when the moulds were opened two of the statutes were found to be perfect but the third and most important had a bad flaw. A second attempt was made but this again failed. Then an old man came forward and said that he was a master artisan and offered to help with the remoulding and recasting of the third Buddha. When the work was finished he disappeared after telling those who had worked with him that this time the image would be found to be perfect. Many days later when the metal had cooled and the mould was opened it was as the old man had said, but on a closer inspection they found that on the head, instead of the single hair usual in images of Buddha, there was the thunderbolt or sign of the god Indra printed between the eyebrows. From this sign people came to the conclusion that the old man who had helped to cast it had been sent by Indra for this purpose. This image is the Phra Bundhajinarag which now sits on the altar of the Wat Phra Sri Mahathatu at Pitsanulok.

After our visit to the temple the police corporal who was our escort produced his instructions and after studying them intently for a few minutes took us to the secondary school, where we picked up the headmaster, who spoke quite reasonably good English. He was to act as our guide about the town. The school of which he was headmaster had 750 pupils and thirty-four teachers on the staff. He made us visit the local hospital where we wandered round the pleasant grounds before he took us to the ruins of yet another wat miles outside the town, where preparations were being made for the annual fair and people of all sorts had collected. Here was a stone covered with an ancient script which few could read and about which we could learn little. We hesitated as to whether we should return to the fair in the evening but came to the conclusion from what we had already seen that it would probably be very similar to the fair at Raheng on a smaller scale.

It was dark when we got back to the hotel and no sooner had we arrived than the electric light in that section of the



town failed completely. Several candles about the thickness of lead pencils were found by the staff and stuck in their own grease in various parts of the room. We went to a nearby shop and bought more candles so that we had enough light to see by.

Whilst we sat in the upstairs hall of the hotel drinking Green Spot and waiting for dinner, there was a considerable commotion and a number of people ran up the stairs carrying baggage and inspecting various rooms. One of the staff volunteered the information that a princess and her party had arrived. Two or three minutes later the lady herself came upstairs and was escorted to her room by the Governor, who seemed to be having a busy day with visitors.

After dinner Princess Sibpan came to us and said she had heard that two English people who were friends of Prince Chula were staying in the hotel. She stopped and talked to us for some little time in perfect English saying that she remembered Prince Chula being born in Bangkok as she was in the palace at the time. To look at her it seemed almost impossible she should have been alive then for, like most Thais, she looked quite young. Princess Sibpan told us that she had arrived at Pitsanulok that day by car in order to attend the fair which we had seen being prepared and intended to return to Nakorn Sawan the following day, and after resting the night there to go right through to Bangkok.

I have forgotten to mention that when we arrived back from the ruins of the temple in the dark we found an official from the Ministry of the Interior awaiting us. He spoke to R. and was obviously astonished at her size; she is tall even for an Englishwoman and, of course, very large in Thai eyes. After telling her he had been sent to help us he ended:

"You are very big and strong," making appropriate gestures with his hands.

"Yes," said R. "and all of you are very little," making signs to show how diminutive the people were. The man in question was very tiny. There was laughter all round, not only amongst the three or four of us who understood English but from other members of the crowd who had surrounded

us and who by the signs had obviously appreciated what had been said. Everywhere we went comments were made on R's. size and it was quite common when walking about the streets, as our escort told us, to hear people calling out to come and look at the giantess passing by.

It is very usual in Thai hotels for the switches which operate the electric light in the bedrooms to be placed *outside* the bedroom door—not a very convenient arrangement. I was told that this was done purposely to enable the hotel staff to switch off the lights, as people from country districts who were unused to electricity did not know how to turn off the lights and usually left them on all night. The same arrangement applied in the Asia Hotel at Pitsanulok, but as the electric light did not come on again whilst we were there this did not worry us.

It was hot in Pitsanulok, the temperature inside the car having been  $104^{\circ}$  F. and in the hall of the hotel the thermometer was registering  $100^{\circ}$  F.

Every part of Thailand seems to have something different to other parts and here many of the women wear ordinary bright coloured rat-tail combs across the backs of their heads, apparently as decorations, and the dogs instead of being the uniform brown found in most parts of the country, are black. I did not like the black dogs of Sukhothai and Pitsanulok nearly as well as their good-looking brown brethren elsewhere.

As an indication of costs in the country away from Bangkok, I would say that in this very modern and reasonably equipped Asia Hotel, a bedroom with the usual type of bathroom cost 50 bhat, or about 17s., for the two of us. The hotel, like most hotels, had its idiosyncrasies. In this case it was the room-boy who even more than others walked in and out of our bedroom, without knocking or pausing, whenever he wanted to do anything or to ask anything. We found, too, that visitors did the same thing, occasionally catching us at inappropriate moments, so that whilst we dressed in the morning we bolted our door. An official, who called on us before we left, finding he could not just walk straight in,

went to the balcony running round the hotel and then proceeded to lean in our open window so that he could chat to us. Life is very simple in Thailand and the western idea of privacy is entirely alien to the ideas of local people.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *Korat and Siamese Cats*

WE left early from Pitsanulok to retrace our steps to the outskirts of Raheng and try to reach Nakorn Sawan the same night. In the car came a Ministry of the Interior official and a policeman beautifully clad in a clean and sharply pressed white uniform. Of course we had the inevitable puncture midway between Pitsanulok and Sukhothai. Our beautifully clad policeman made no bones whatsoever about helping me change the wheel, but oh! his white trousers. By the time we had finished, not only I but he and his clean uniform were literally plastered with the thick red dust that covers everything. I was used to it and he made no complaint.

At Sukhothai we stopped to find a place to mend the puncture and after hunting about found a most able and businesslike woman presiding over what appeared to be a small and primitive retreading factory. Under her directions a new tube which we carried was put in our spare cover and the puncture mended, after the inevitable 3-inch nail had been pulled out. Of course, a small crowd collected to watch the operations, showing great interest in the car and ourselves.

As we jogged along over the bumpy roads we passed a bus lying upside down beside the road. The passengers were still inside the bus, all alive and contentedly sitting on the inside of the upside down roof. I suppose it was the only place with any shade. The normal arrangement for buses in this country is a lorry-like body with open sides and a strong roof. In the body of the lorry are sacks of rice and other merchandise and on the roof perch the passengers, as tightly



20. Road construction in Northern Thailand



21. A sandy "deviation", of which many exist, whilst bridges are being repaired



22. Young wood carriers. Thai children learn to work whilst young



23. House boats on the river at Sukhothai



packed as sardines in a tin. Sometimes the police make the passengers climb down in the interests of safety, for most of the busses are obviously top heavy, and as they bump and sway about over the corrugations and loose dust surfaces they skid constantly and can turn over very easily indeed, even without the help of a corner.

Over twenty miles from our destination we were met by Sub.-Lt. Vinai, who had escorted us from Nakorn Sawan before. He took us to the same excellent hotel where we again had a good room.

The Mayor came to dinner with us and then took us to see a Thai film which had won the award for the best Asiatic film at a recent festival in Japan. It described the love affairs of two young Thais; the parental opposition to the girl's marriage to the poor boy and her forced marriage to the wealthy young man, resulting in her lover becoming a monk. To our eyes, used to the slickness of American and the finish of British films, it seemed crude and amateurish but it had been filmed in colour and the scenery and much of the photography was exceedingly beautiful, whilst the insight it gave us into the marriage ceremonies and ritual of entering the priesthood, caused it to be extraordinarily interesting in many respects, even though we did not understand a word. I am glad to have seen a Thai film.

When we left Nakorn Sawan we had before us a long run to Korat or Nakorn Rajasima, so we wanted to make our usual dawn start, but the police Landrover had not arrived and after waiting a short time we left unescorted. As far as Chainat the road was exceedingly bad, corrugated and full of deep holes and we had to travel slowly at between ten and twenty miles an hour. In many places they were burning off the forest but apart from this the trees and bushes appeared greener than they had been in the north and it seemed almost as if spring was trying to burst out. At one point we passed through a terrific forest fire with flames forty or fifty feet high licking up the bushes and bamboos and rolling across the road. Huge columns of smoke made it difficult to see our direction and the sudden explosions of the hollow bam-

boos in the heat of the flames made it sound like a battle-field. We could not stop to take pictures owing to the heat and flames, but went through as slowly as we dared, taking a film whilst the car passed through the flames.

Of course, shortly afterwards we had the inevitable puncture. We had crossed a number of wooden bridges and then drove off the road to a deviation through the bush and for some time as we bumped and rolled over the loose sandy hollows and low hillocks I did not realize we had a flat tyre. However, the time came when even with the existing road surface I realized something was wrong. It was not long before I found a screw, instead of a nail, projecting from the cover.

We missed our police this time for it was very hot indeed. I put our thermometer outside the car and it registered over 130° F. in the sun. The wheel with the puncture was so hot that I could not hold it and the tools which I spread out on the ground beside me rapidly became so heated that they could only be held for a few moments at a time. The body of the car was so hot that it was painful if one accidentally rested a bare arm against it.

Whilst we were making the change a car overtook us with an Englishman and a Thai. They stopped to offer their help but I thanked them and told them we could manage. I did, however, give them my card and ask them to have it delivered to the Governor of Korat, where they were going, with a message to say that we might be late getting in owing to punctures and bad roads.

The inside of the car, after standing in this terrific temperature, was almost hot enough to cook a joint of meat. Both of us were dripping with sweat and our clothes were rust red with dirt, whilst our faces, hair and every part of us was covered in dust through which streams of sweat had coursed, making us look perfectly horrible. Of course, the car soon started to boil as we travelled in low gear over the atrocious surface. The water and other liquid which we carried with us had long been exhausted and it was with a feeling of tremendous relief that we saw a wayside café, rather a Thai

imitation of an English lorry drivers' pull-up. We stopped and went inside. Before I could even ask for some drinks, a man arose and a moment later came back with a bowl of water and a piece of soap which he held out in front of us with a broad grin. We thanked him for his kindness and felt better for his help and for the Green Spot which followed. There was no electric refrigeration and no ice-boxes here and the orangeade was warm, but at least it was something wet and comparatively refreshing. One man among the half dozen spoke fair English and questioned us as to what we were doing and where we had come from, translating our replies to his friends and asking us their questions. They were interested and amazed when they found that both the car and ourselves had come all the way from England and had motored over a great deal of their country. In the end their amazement gave way to amusement and we were told that although they had heard that the English were mad they had never believed it before. We continued our journey followed by the cheers of our drinking companions.

Fortunately the road improved soon after and we reached Korat just as it was getting dark. We were much later than had been expected and we did not know where to find the Governor's residence. I asked several people for help and showed them the message we had had written for us in Thai for just such an emergency, asking to be directed to the Governor's house. But no one seemed to know until I asked a saffron-robed monk who, though he could not speak English, read our message and clearly indicated where we had to go. We were in no fit state to call on the Governor but this had to be done. R. was somewhat cross and queried the necessity of calling on the Governor, suggesting that we should go straight to the hotel.

"That's all very well," I said, "but what's the name of the hotel, how do we ask for it and where is it?"

Obviously we had to call on the Governor as we were. He was out but the Governor's lady, though she spoke little English, entertained us whilst a messenger was sent to find him. He had been playing tennis and was still at the club,



but it was not many minutes before he arrived, speaking excellent English and telling us that everything was laid on for us, and that he had received the message that had been brought in by the car which overtook us. He had given orders for a search party to go back on the road to help us if we did not arrive by dark. As it was then just dark he hastily rang up the police and saved them going out on a wild goose chase. He took us to the Hotel Taharnsamacky, where we found the Deputy Governor awaiting us in case we had done as R. had suggested and gone straight to the hotel.

I have never enjoyed cold water so much. We went into the bathroom, flung off our clothes and took it in turns to pour basin after basin of water out of the Ali Baba over our heads. A deposit of liquid mud soon covered the floor but more water and soap eventually cleared it away and by the time we were more or less clean the Deputy Governor and our new police officer were awaiting us for dinner.

After dinner we strolled round the town for a short time and then went in to bed. There were no lights, for the electricity, though functioning, was so grievously overloaded that there was only the palest glimmer and candles had to be brought to help us out. There was not sufficient power to work the fan and it was very hot, the temperature in the building being rather over 100° F. and I hesitate to say what it was in the car lest I be accused of exaggeration. Nevertheless, we fell asleep as soon as we lay down though we had already been warned of more ruins to see in the morning.

Thailand is an exceptionally clean country and, as I believe I have already said, we did not see a flea, a bug or a louse in the whole of the time we were in the country. But there were plenty of mosquitoes and at Korat, R., tired out, obviously did not fix her mosquito net properly and in the morning her legs and arms were literally covered with bites and I killed fifteen of the insects inside her net. Korat was one of the worst places we found for mosquitoes but there were very few flies and all told we found it one of the pleasantest cities in the whole of Thailand. It is a largish town and still has

remnants of the ancient town walls and one of the city gates.

Nai Chua, the Deputy Governor, and Police Sub.-Lt. Araya Promphanta called for us in the morning to show us the sights of the neighbourhood. We went first of all to the Bank of Ayuthya to try and cash some Midland Bank travellers cheques, which, so far, everyone, bank, hotel or shop all over Thailand had completely refused to have anything whatsoever to do with—Midland Bank please note! Indeed, throughout our journeys this time we had found that travellers cheques were to all intents and purposes useless except in the biggest banks in the capital city and we usually carried ample cash with us. The Bank of Ayuthya at Korat was no exception. I do not think they had ever seen a travellers cheque, but as the Deputy Governor had brought me there himself the manager took my word for it that they were quite genuine, asked me what the rate of exchange should be and gave me what I asked. To ensure I didn't receive more than I was entitled to I asked for a bhat less than I had received from the Bank of Hong Kong and Shanghai in Bangkok.

Then after various other business calls we were taken to the ruins of Mueng Phimai some twenty miles away from Korat. There are the remains of an immense temple here but a little more is standing than usual and we were able to appreciate the magnificent workmanship put into this place by the Cambodians in the time of King Nariman I, a thousand years ago.

There are several imposing gateways with carved lintels and the remains of a magnificent prang or pagoda, but what intrigued me most were the amusing sculptures. All about lay huge blocks of stone carved deeply with gods and dancing girls, monkeys and warriors. The lintels of the gateways were similarly carved and up the face of the prang could be distinguished more dancing and leaping bodies. One fresco of monkeys made us roar with laughter as one of the animals was holding his nose between finger and thumb and most obviously indicating to his companions that there was a very

nasty smell indeed in the neighbourhood. These carvings are very perfectly preserved and look almost as though they had been cut only a few years ago.

As usual it was hot, but outside the remains of the temple was a clump of coconut palms and also, as usual, at my suggestion that a green coconut would be very refreshing, a man was sent to the top of a lofty palm at top speed where he cut a number of nuts which R. and I enjoyed a few minutes later. Owing to its very thick outer husk and inner shell the milk of the coconut is always cool and, contrary to ideas in England, we never found either the milk or the soft fresh flesh of the nut in the least indigestible.

From the temple ruins we were taken to lunch at the new irrigation dam which had been built to store water during the wet season in order that about 30,000 acres should be irrigated during the dry period of the year. Close by was an amazing banyan tree, its branches spreading over a tremendous area and throwing down roots from time to time, which, in their turn, had become almost like trunks to support the spreading boughs. The tree was over a thousand years old and I paced the spread of its boughs and found them ninety yards in one direction and fifty-four yards in the other. Imagine this enormous spread all from one tree. The lowest boughs were seven or eight feet above the ground and here in their shade had been placed a table and chairs in preparation for a picnic lunch.

Beside the banyan tree ran the river and a backwater made a pleasant pool in which an attractive pavilion had been built above the water by the Prime Minister who presented it for the use of the officials of Korat. We sat and drank iced beer and took in the peaceful beauty of the scene; the placid waters of the pool surrounding the pavilion; the lotuses and lilies thrusting their heads above the surface; beside it the enormous banyan tree and in the distance patches of colour from the many flame-of-the-forest trees which grew round about. We lunched excellently with various officials in the shade of the banyan. Everything had been brought out from Korat for the occasion, ice and all.



This picnic, again, is one of the most pleasant memories of our tour.

After lunch I walked over to the dam where piles were still being driven, though not with a mechanical pile-driver. A tripod had been erected over the baulk to be driven into the ground and to this a chain and pulley with an enormous weight attached was fastened. From the chain depended about twenty ropes, each with its human attendant. The work was done to the chant of the foreman who kept on singing what sounded exactly like "left arm—*down*, left arm—*down*". Every time he said "left arm" the men heaved on their ropes and brought the weight to the top of the tripod. At the word "*down*" they let go and with a tremendous thud the weight dropped on the end of the pile. This human pile-driver fascinated me and I spent some time watching it at work, to the obvious slight annoyance of the policeman who had been detailed to follow me and who much preferred the shade of the banyan tree to the heat of the blazing sun by the pile-driver. He hovered at the edge of the shade and smiled cheerfully when I returned once more to our friends still sitting under the banyan.

Korat has a most excellent municipal farm of about 120 acres where fowls, fish and cattle are bred and bananas and other fruits and vegetables are grown and sold to the public. Many pigs are sent off to Bangkok and farmers in the province of Korat are allowed to buy birds and beasts from the farm and so improve their own stock. In order to do this they import pedigree birds and beasts from different parts of the world, particularly from Great Britain and Australia. The pigs we saw were middle whites and Tamworths, some of them pure bred and others crossed with the hollow-backed local breed. The hens were chiefly Rhode Island Reds and White Leghorns, many of these, again, being crossed with local birds. We looked at the pigs, we saw the bananas, we went to the fishponds where fish are bred and fattened for the local market and we had a good laugh at a local farmer departing with two enormous pigs which he had purchased. He was riding a samloh (tricycle rickshaw) and in the passenger seat

he had two enormous Tamworth pigs, lying on their backs, their feet trussed together whilst they gazed about quite contentedly, though upside down, looking at the world as they passed with an expression as much as to say, "See what an important pig I am. I am driving away in a samloh instead of having to walk in the hot sun." The farmer stopped to be photographed but obviously saw nothing funny in what was making R. and myself, the Deputy Governor, the police and the farm officials roar with laughter.

The farm is, of course irrigated, water being brought from a canal leading from the river to a higher level by means of an endless chain of scoops driven by an 8 h.p. engine. Certainly the water comes out in vast quantities at the higher level to be led in ditches about the farm, but I am afraid I cannot quite credit the figures given me by the manager, who said that with this machine, of which he was obviously very proud, one acre of land could be flooded six inches deep in five minutes. Though I queried this statement he insisted he was correct, but possibly he was confusing minutes with hours and even this would be a very fine performance. Whatever the capacity of the pump may be it is certainly extremely efficient and the whole of the farm is well irrigated. Part of the land is let off in smallholdings of about ten acres to ex-servicemen and others who are encouraged to farm under modern conditions and are given more land as they prove their worth. Certainly this municipal undertaking seems to be very up-to-date and excellently run.

Wherever we went in Korat one of the police came with us, more as a guide and helper than anything else. He was a little man who looked about fourteen years old, but told us he was married with several children. I believe he gave his age as twenty-four. He talked a certain amount of English and was very useful to us in many different ways.

Korat, a city of 40,000 people, is the capital of a province with a population of about 800,000. It is a colourful place teeming with life and we found much pleasure in simply pottering about in the town, taking photographs, for which people willingly posed, and of the open-air restaurants,

ranks of samloh drivers waiting to be hired and life in the city generally. We were glad that our travels would bring us back again to Korat, for we liked the place, the people and the hotel where, incidentally, we had the first spring mattresses that we had so far found in Thailand.

The Governor, Suwan Reun Yod, was helpful and his deputy, Nai Chua, one of the many friendly men we met in this country. In fact I think the lack of a proper electricity supply was almost the only bad point about Korat, but this we were assured was temporary.

"Never mind," they said, "it will be all right in three months' time when the new generator is working."

I should like to go back and see if this is the case for twice we were taken to see the site of the new generating station upon which many hopes were obviously built.

Korat is the traditional home of the Siamese cat and here, if anywhere, we expected to find examples of the species, but people simply laughed at us and repeated what we had been told before, that all the Siamese cats had gone to England. We did find one cat and I took its photograph, but it was a Thai cat and not a Siamese.



## *Chapter Fifteen*

### *We Reach the Mekong River*

ONE gets accustomed to odd sights when travelling in other countries though of course the sights are not at all odd to people who live always with them. But when we met a monk, his saffron robes flying in the wind, galloping along the verge of the road on a pony, it was sufficiently unusual for me to remember it. In the first case I had never seen a mounted monk and in the second case ponies or horses seem very rare in Thailand and it was most exceptional to see anyone on horseback. In England, in my youth, we were rather brought up on stories of Buddhist monks who robbed and murdered and were always the villains of the plot, hiding in the dark recesses of some dim temple. Nothing could be further from the mark, and the monks to whom I talked and with whom I came in contact were gentle, pleasant people and instead of robbing were apt to be robbed, like the monk to whom we gave a lift because he was walking to the nearest police station to complain that someone had stolen his begging-bowl. I often wonder whether he ever got it back. The theft was a serious one for him as these Buddhist monks live on the food given to them by people of the villages near their temples, and in the early morning it is a common sight to see a long procession of saffron-robed monks going out with their bowls and visiting house after house where everyone gives them a little rice, some fruit, a piece of fish, or some small oddment of food. After their rounds, the monks return to the monastery or temple which they serve, and eat their meal, for they may not eat after midday.

From Korat eastwards we were travelling in that part of Thailand which is considered to be poverty-stricken and in-

fertile, lacking water and generally the poor part of the country. It is true the roads on the whole are bad, possibly, in most provinces, worse than the average, but we saw little signs of actual poverty and conversations with Governors and Deputy Sheriffs confirmed our opinion that the bad reports are exaggerations.

The rice which grows here is of a rather glutinous variety looked down on by most other Thais, who, as a term of contempt, sometimes refer to a person as being a man who eats sticky rice. It is perhaps this that has given rise to the idea that the eastern provinces are so poverty stricken. Certainly, they are not as densely populated as other parts of the country. We passed through fewer villages, we saw fewer people and we certainly saw fewer cars because during the whole of the time that we were east of Korat we did not see one single private car outside the towns, and the little motor transport which was using the roads consisted of lorries, Landrovers or jeeps used by the police and army, or the heavy vehicles used by government officials in going about their business. But even these were few and far between.

The country on our first stage eastwards consisted of low-growing scrub and sometimes miles of open park-like country dotted here and there with large trees.

At one point, I believe at Ban Phan, we picked up a police sergeant who spoke no English but instead conversed with us in perfect French, the only person in Thailand with whom we found that language useful. Indeed, despite the proximity of the French-speaking countries of Laos and Cambodia, towards which we were making, hardly anyone seemed to have any knowledge at all of that language though English continued to be common.

I have a note that on this day the vibration and bumping of the car over the bad road surfaces caused both the back doors to fly open, though they were bolted and locked, and the compass which had been bolted to the dashboard, dropped off again three times in one day. After that we gave it up. Bad roads meant slow and low gear driving and that in its turn meant a boiling radiator. Also there were frequent

wooden bridges and as all traffic slowed up before reaching a crossing and accelerated immediately it was over, the patches of road at both ends of the bridge were even worse than the rest of the highway.

Our police officer from Korat, who took us on the first stage of our journey and who had asked us where we were going from there, seemed very worried on our behalf. We told him that after touring the eastern provinces we expected to go back to Korat, whereupon he said very gravely:

"I will pray to my Buddha to protect you on your journey."

We were very touched by his solicitude, thanked him and shook hands. On returning to England a bishop who is a friend of ours said to us:

"Well, there's one thing I can stop now; I need not pray for your safety every day."

We told him that we had received Buddhist prayers as well as Christian help to protect us on our journey and quite obviously one or both had been effective. Indeed, though I do not pretend to understand the depths of the Buddhist religion, I can see very little difference in the ethical values of Buddhism and Christianity. Even the commandments are almost exactly the same, though the Buddhist commandments are fewer and more positive whilst ours are mostly negative.

On arriving at Maha Sarakham we spent some time with the Governor before being taken to a very pleasant bungalow a mile or so outside the town on the edge of an irrigation dam. Here it was quiet, peaceful and cool. The bungalow had previously been the house of the resident engineer when the barrage for the irrigation scheme was being built and was now used occasionally by the Governor and for official guests. Two police were left to keep an eye on and look after us, and an old watchman took charge of our well-being in the bungalow. He persuaded us to lie in a variety of camp chair in the airy sitting-room of the bungalow whilst he brought the inevitable iced Green Spot and roared with laughter when he saw us lean back in these



chairs which receded as the backs took our weights, so that we ended up in a practically horizontal position, very comfortable for lazing in but an impossible position from which to drink orange juice from a bottle by means of a straw.

There was another dam and big irrigation scheme on the other side of the town and there we drove with one of the officials and sat for some time enjoying the peace of the big lake which had been formed by the barrage. We were gradually coming to like the eastern provinces very much, despite the reports we had heard about them. Korat gave us a pleasant send-off and Maha Sarakham added to our good opinions.

In the evening the Governor, Luang Anumati-Rajkich, with his Chief of Staff and Chief of Police called on us to see that all was well and we were comfortable. For some time they stopped and talked giving us a lot of information about that part of the country.

When we left Maha Sarakham after a peaceful and restful stay the Governor and Chief of Police and their staff turned up shortly after dawn to see us off, sending the Deputy Sheriff and a policeman to escort us as far as Kalisin.

On this stage of the journey there were again masses of brilliant flame-of-the-forest trees, their blossom standing out even more prominently than would otherwise have been the case owing to the burnt-up state of the countryside. Here, for the first time, we saw numbers of people riding on small ponies.

In one place R. had a real nightmare drive as the road had been washed away for a very great distance in the floods a few months before. This was a place where the road was a causeway built six to ten feet above marshy ground. It would have taken a very long time to rebuild it and so for about a mile a very temporary and rough wooden causeway had been built. It was narrow and not protected at the sides. It wound in and out of the countryside avoiding the worst hillocks and clumps of trees. Driving along it called for intense care and concentration and I was glad that our return journey to Maha Sarakham would be by a different road.

At Kalisin the police requested us to call on the Governor, which we did at quarter-past eight in the morning, rather under protest. Quite naturally we had to wait a short while before he appeared, and whilst we waited I noticed many photographs and cups won in tennis tournaments. When the Governor appeared he was a young man and we chatted with him for some time about tennis, of which he was one of the leading Thai players. He told us he also used to play rugger and his five sons were all tennis players, the youngest having just been presented with a cup by the King himself. We said good-bye and resumed our journey and he laughingly said:

"Now I can go back and finish my bath."

We laughed with him over this though I imagine he must have been rather annoyed at being interrupted in his toilet simply to be polite to two strangers who were passing through his changwad or province.

I have not explained that Thailand is divided into seventy-two provinces, or changwads, each under a Governor who is directly responsible first to his Governor-General and then to the government in Bangkok. The provinces are assembled into nine groups each under a Governor-General. Every province is divided into ampurs and each ampur is in the charge of a Deputy Sheriff. The organization is rather similar to that of our counties in England, the principal difference being that the Governor's job is a paid appointment, whilst in England the Lord-Lieutenant's post is a purely honorary one. Also the Governor has a great deal more authority in his province than the Lord-Lieutenant in his county.

The countryside began to get drier and more burnt up though we saw several large lakes not far from Maha Sarakham. In places we passed through thickly wooded country where enormous leaves at least a foot long were falling from the trees as we passed, like autumn at home though spring was already almost on its way. In the woods crickets were shrilling loudly and huge butterflies, at least six inches across and coloured sulphur and black, flew in and

out of the bushes and across the road. Sometimes we passed through lovely avenues of tall trees. We had the countryside to ourselves. There were no cars and very few buses or lorries. In places grass was growing in the middle of the road. As we went further east the country began to lose its burnt-up aspect and here and there we saw the faint green of stirring buds on the bushes and even the jungle itself seemed aware that the rains would arrive soon. We climbed into the hills and had a glorious view over a jungle-filled valley to more hills beyond. Masses of bright periwinkle blue flowers climbed in clusters over the trees and white and yellow convolvulus-like blooms starred the verges of the road. For a time we had a wide road with a good surface passing through thickly wooded jungle so that we drove in comfort in a grateful coolness. Here in the hills the country seemed unpopulated.

At last we began to descend steeply, the road winding backwards and forwards along the face of the hills with hair-pin bends every hundred yards. So we came down to Sakol Nakorn.

On our journey we were using the one in a million G.S.G.S. map produced by the survey of India for the War Office, admittedly a good many years ago, but we found it very inaccurate. As an instance, the mountainous district through which we had just travelled was not shown at all on the map. The country appeared to be flat and easy.

We stopped for a "cowpat" at a street restaurant at Sakol Nakorn where a woman feeding a baby looked after us with the aid of a completely naked boy of about twelve. Sitting at another table, surveying the scene, was an apparently naked Chinaman, though it is true we could only see the top half of his body.

R. decided to go to the post office in one of our frequent but usually unsuccessful efforts to post letters. As we came away a small stark naked child came running after her calling out loudly, of course in Thai. Our policeman said he was calling "mother, mother" but when R. turned round to see what he wanted, he stopped in horror, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head as he stared at her. Then he turned



and ran howling at the top of his voice. The poor child was obviously not used to Europeans and had not realized from the back view what he was going to see!

In the distance we began to see rugged hills on the horizon. They grew higher and bigger and more rugged as we approached Nakorn Phanom on the banks of the Mekong river. On the far side were the mountains we had seen for some time, and that was Laos. We had reached the eastern frontier.

Here the Governor was away, but the Deputy Governor, Chuan Chitsamrevnc, was expecting us and took us to quite the best resthouse that we had seen in the whole of Thailand, a beautiful little building quite close to the administrative offices of the province. After we had an Ali Baba he and the headmaster of the secondary school, Shaveng Siriratana, drove round with us to see the sights. To us the chief thing of interest was the Mekong, a mighty river running in a deep gorge. The waters were low, for it was the end of the dry season, but with the rains it would rise nearly to the top of the banks. Unfortunately, according to the Deputy Governor, the river is useless to Thailand as it holds no fish and they cannot use it for irrigation. I could not understand why the waters could not be used to irrigate the dry and dusty provinces of the east and came back to this point at several other towns on the river which we visited. Quite rightly it was said that the river was now too low to be used to irrigate the land. When I suggested a dam I was told that involved politics and the co-operation of the country of Laos on the other side and Cambodia further to the south. Then I suggested a pumping installation to raise some water to the level of the east Thailand plains, but was told that politics were an insuperable difficulty and that in any case the province and the country as a whole was too poor to finance such a scheme. Later I chanced to meet some Americans from one of their missions in Thailand and we fell to discussing the irrigation of these eastern provinces. When I said that I was surprised that the waters of the Mekong were not used for this purpose the American to whom I was talking jumped up and held out his hand.



24. Autumn leaves in Eastern Thailand



25. The Wat Benchamabopit or Marble Temple, Bangkok



26. A typical Thai restaurant of the better kind (at Korat)



27. A trader clears a jam of teak logs



"Put it there, friend, you've said it exactly. I've been asking the same thing ever since I've been here."

We were both agreed that the difficulties of obtaining the water were not insuperable, though they might be expensive, but then of course both of us were ignorant of the political implications and there are probably very good reasons why the authorities do not make use of this water. I must say it is hard to imagine what the real reason can be.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### *Beside the Mekong*

We had a most interesting dinner whilst at Nakorn Phanom. Nai Chuan Chitrsamreunc, the Deputy Governor and Nai Shaveng Siriratana the headmaster, collected us and took us to a Chinese restaurant in the town. They thought it would be better than bringing a meal to us in the resthouse. The restaurant was of the usual unimposing type, not very well lighted and rather primitive in its furnishings.

We were seated at a table when the Chief Customs Officer and a local lawyer, whom I understand was the Government Prosecuting Counsel, were brought to the table to join the party. We had an excellent and rather hilarious meal as all four Thais spoke quite good English.

During dinner the Chief Customs Officer saw someone sitting nearby with a large package of cigarettes. His trained eye noticed that they were French cigarettes which had obviously come in from the other side of the river (from Laos) and to his knowledge had not paid duty. Justice was swift and efficient. He went over to the table and commandeered the bundle of packets which he opened and proceeded to throw out to practically everybody in the restaurant, a couple of packets each. He then returned the remaining few to the offending smuggler. As far as I noticed, not a word was said on either side. Justice was meted out unofficially in dead silence, but when he had finished and resumed his seat at the table there was a roar of laughter from everybody, including the culprit.

It was suggested that R. and I should cross the river to Laos because we could buy all sorts of French goods there far more cheaply than we could in Thailand.

"Yes," said R. to the Customs Officer, "and you will be waiting for us on this side to run us in for smuggling or charge us treble duty."

Laughingly he indignantly repudiated any such ideas, but had to admit the justice of the information which R. gave him when she said that England was so close to France it was far cheaper for us to buy French goods in France than get them from the Far East, where prices were high and carriage had to be added to the cost.

I was offered some of the French cigarettes but refused them as I do not smoke. However, I produced my snuff-box and handed it round, though no one joined me in a pinch. I was asked if I had tried Thai snuff and on my saying that I did not know it was made in Thailand, the whole party immediately whisked R. and me out of the restaurant and we proceeded on a shopping tour in the darkness. First we visited the local chemist, who produced for my benefit no fewer than seventeen brands of Thai snuff, all ground very fine and of different flavours. I was given three phials of different varieties as a souvenir, but I found them rather too highly flavoured for my liking. The chemist spoke excellent English and was interested in showing us all the patent medicines he had imported from England and we had difficulty in getting away without a load of Enos Fruit Salts, Cussons soap, Macleans toothpaste and other articles.

We then visited the silversmith and were shown many excellent examples of local silver work, chiefly in the form of bowls used for dipping bath water out of the Ali Babas. Some were pure silver others 70 per cent or 50 per cent pure. All were sold by weight. We were tempted to buy but the thought of English customs duties stopped us in time.

We went from shop to shop in the darkness, being shown Thai silks and niello-ware and having all sorts of things hauled out of dim recesses at the request of the Deputy Governor or the Chief Customs Officer. The latter, in particular, seemed to know all about everything that every shopkeeper had in his store. It was almost uncanny how he asked for certain things to be brought to us and to notice the



way in which the shopkeeper looked at him as he went into the background to produce the required article. I do not know how much stuff was smuggled. I should like to have heard the stories behind some of the things; but our friends certainly gave us a most entertaining evening, finally taking us back to our resthouse and drinking a last Green Spot with us before they bade us good night. We were sorry we had such a short time to stay in Nakorn Phanom on the Mekong river, overlooking the mountains of Laos.

Our sentry seemed to be very worried all that night because we slept with our windows open. The crunch of his feet on the gravel round and round the building was continuous and from time to time he apparently tried the windows to see if it would be easy for anyone to get in. As I have said, it was a lovely little resthouse and it had a most superior Ali Baba—a large concrete tiled tank filled with water into which to dip our bowls. I very nearly climbed in and splashed about inside.

Breakfast appeared before dawn: cold fried eggs, beef steak, tomatoes, spring onions and lettuce, with condensed milk and coffee essence, Thai tea and soda water, followed by biscuits and butter. All this had to be eaten with a spoon and fork only.

When thinking back on the enormous supplies of food we were given it is hard to realize that by the time we got back to England R. was nearly a stone lighter than when she had left, although we had flown back slowly, stopping for a few days or a week at several places *en route*. For my part, I forgot how much weight I lost but my waist measurement was reduced by five inches.

One last note about Nakorn Phanom. Before we went to bed R. settled down in the resthouse to write some letters. Immediately she was well under weigh the caretaker dashed up and put down a spittoon on either side of her so that she might carry out her writing in comfort. Thais are great users of these utensils and, indeed, I think the only really disgusting thing in Thailand, according to our notions, is the constant clearing of throats, the hoicking and spitting. I

asked a doctor if this constant spitting was not a very bad thing for the people in spreading disease, but his reply was to the effect that surely it was better to spit out the phlegm than to swallow it, and the bright sunshine soon killed any germs which might be disseminated. I hope he is right. But I wish they'd fit silencers.

On our way south along the Mekong river we crossed a number of good, reinforced concrete bridges instead of the usual wooden structures, and made fairly good time to Tart Phanom where we stopped to see the wat and pagoda said to be about 2,000 years old. I queried this figure but several people insisted that it had been built eight years after the death of Buddha. I still think that the original wat may have been built then, but the beautiful and unusual pagoda with the curious markings looked almost modern in comparison with many other temples we had visited. A somewhat bizarre effect has been created by modern sculptures which have been added to the walls of the courtyard. One was of a man in modern European clothes, wearing a homburg hat and a monocle, having stones thrown at him by Thai children. Was this a reference to the unpopularity of western people among the easterners and did it reflect their real feelings towards us, so well disguised by laughing kindness and courtesy? I wonder? The east is always inscrutable but somehow I feel that the Thais we were living with and who helped us so much were quite genuine in their attitude; still I cannot explain this awful sculpture. Another carving depicted a one-eyed man with a pole slung over his shoulder, carrying an elephant at one end and a cat at the other. There were several others of a like nature, totally out of place as part of the building of this wonderful and ancient temple. On the lower part of the pagoda there was a great deal of obviously ancient work, but right at the top there was a gold umbrella three and a half metres high, which was only added in 1954. The great gateway to the wat is only opened during special religious festivals—rather like the Cathedral of St. Peter at Rome.

This part of Thailand has many Annamese, the women

picturesque in their curiously folded red head-dresses. We were told that these immigrants learn to speak and write Thai very rapidly and do so better than many Thais themselves. They generally go into business and are a busy and hard-working part of the population.

We saw many of the people here wearing jerseys with the interlocked ring badges of the Olympic Games of 1954. Large numbers of children and many grown-ups wore these white jerseys with the coloured badges, sometimes wearing a bath towel twisted round their heads as an accessory. Generally, too, the grown-ups and the children were dirtier than in other parts of Thailand, but we had been told that the eastern provinces were the most backward in the country and so were not surprised. Probably this indicated the absence of klongs and rivers. The people did not seem as intelligent here as elsewhere.

There were more cattle than we had seen before and several times we had to stop and clear them from the bridges before we could proceed. The stops, as a matter of fact, were a relief, for the road became very bad again.

We stayed some time at Mukedahn and went down to the banks of the Mekong river and once more looked towards Laos. The mountains loomed behind in the north and the country on the other side of the river was dense forest and jungle, turning fresh and green, a great relief after the burnt-up countryside through which we had travelled so many hundreds of miles.

At Umnat Charoon\* we visited another wayside restaurant and ate the local food. The usual number of children and a few adults collected to watch us, but neither here nor elsewhere were we incommoded at all by the interest displayed in our, no doubt, curious habits.

The sky was overcast and it looked as though rain might fall at any moment. The temperature was lower than usual, only 96° F, in the car. We heard later that rain had fallen in the adjoining province at this time, a rather earlier start than usual to the rainy season which, as shown by the bursting green buds on the trees and bushes, obviously was near.

\*Also called Bung!



Patches of tobacco were passed frequently and were always referred to as "Virginia" by people to whom we spoke. R. told our police officer that we should call it just tobacco but it took a tremendous amount of explaining that the words "tobacco" and "Virginia" were not synonymous but that Virginia was a variety of tobacco. This seemed to puzzle him for a long time and he could be heard muttering to himself "tobacco not Virginia".

Blossom was beginning to appear on the trees and the mangoes were covered in a cream coloured mist of blossom not unlike sweet chestnut, and the palms and bamboos were all putting on a fresher green.

The roads hereabouts presented us with a new difficulty. The ruts on either side of a central hump were so deep that our sump kept bumping on the surface and I was afraid it might be damaged. The only thing to do was to drive in an uncomfortable position with the near-side wheels on the outside edge of the road and the off-side wheels perched high on the hump (the rule of the road is the same as in England), an attitude in which it was difficult to control the car as well as being decidedly uncomfortable.

At last we came to Ubol (pronounced Ubon) capital of the largest province in Thailand, with a population of about one million people. The Governor, Nai Kiat Tanakul, had only recently been appointed to the province and had previously been a senior official in the Ministry of the Interior in Bangkok. He had visited England and been to London for six months so that he spoke excellent English and was able to tell us a lot about his province and about his ideas for it. He is certainly progressive and enthusiastic and is already doing much for this poor part of the country. His enthusiasm was beginning to show good results whilst we were there in the extra work being done to the roads, which were far better than those in any other part of the eastern provinces which we visited. He had to leave the town, the day after we arrived, to conduct some business in a distant part of his chungwad but placed us in good hands before he went away. The "good hands" were those of Nai Seni

## THAILAND JOURNEY

Varnankura, better known as "Sanoh", the tennis champion of Thailand.

We stayed at the Chiew Kee Hotel, in some respects one of the oddest places we found during our journey. The entrance from the street was, as usual, to a ramshackle barn of a place running an apparently immense distance under the upper floor, with wooden pillars, supporting the upper structure and roof, rising from the ground like trees in a dim forest. In the dark recesses could be seen the glow of fires where food was being cooked. On bedsteads scattered about the place at all hours of the day lay naked children or adults taking a siesta. Dogs strolled in and out. The whole place looked most unprepossessing but after climbing some rickety stairs one emerged into a long hall, on either side of which were ranges of rooms. The partitions between the rooms were of hardboard and extended about two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. In the hall, on the opposite side to our bedroom, were several washbasins and on our arrival, as we sat at a table outside our bedroom door, doing our best to entertain the Governor, there was a gent in his underpants washing out his smalls. Similarly, when we had our evening meal there were people close by washing down and clearing their throats for the night. I would add here that the dawn chorus was terrific, not of bird song, but of the large population of guests staying in this hotel, where every sound could be heard, lustily clearing their throats, snorting, coughing and spitting. As I have said before, this characteristic of the people was the only thing which we found absolutely disgusting—and to us it was.

Our bedroom had a narrow balcony open to the sky and there we had a modern w.c., a concrete Ali Baba and a washbasin with cold running water. There we conducted our toilet in the open air. It was certainly an odd place but strangely quite comfortable and the cooking was the finest we met anywhere, except in private houses, in Thailand. On our first night an excellent, typically European dinner of soup, fish, chicken and cabinet pudding was served, perfectly cooked and properly laid with knives, forks and spoons. The

table was equally well served by relays of small boys, the younger brothers of the manager. We were very puzzled at these western customs in the Far East of eastern Thailand but when we enquired found that the manager or proprietor, I could not find out which, Han Chio Pong, had been chef to Prince Chakrabongse, the father of our friend Prince Chula and had, in fact, accompanied Prince Chakrabongse on his last journey to Singapore, where the Prince had died. The old man called on us and sat at our table; aged, clean, composed and extremely interested in all we had to tell him, particularly about Prince Chula, whom he remembered. His son, Han Chong Kon, made an efficient manager and interpreter and it was largely due to his work that we found the hotel so comfortable.

Whilst we were at Ubol I heard that there was to be a good Thai boxing tournament. "Sanoh" offered to take us but R., after her experience at Raheng, backed out and went to bed. It was quite a good show though not an outstandingly bloody one as had been the previous tournament I attended. There was, however, one lovely incident when Blue corner brought his knee hard to the solar plexus of Red corner, knocking him half way across the ring. Red landed with a terrific thump on the canvas but almost immediately bounced up again and charged his opponent kicking furiously right and left. I cannot understand how any man could have stood up to such a terrific blow in the wind, almost without turning a hair. At this tournament none of the competitors did the slow motion miming before the contest but when I returned to the hotel R. told me she had heard the familiar boxing tunes, floating to the hotel from the stadium.



## *Chapter Seventeen*

### *Ubol and the Eastern Provinces*

OUR royal chef did us proud for breakfast as well; bacon and scrambled eggs, China tea, butter and marmalade. Yet somehow it seemed strange to be eating western food in such thoroughly eastern surroundings.

We were both extensively bitten by mosquitoes in the night despite our nets, but the bites did not seem particularly irritating and as we were taking our paludrine regularly we hoped for the best with regard to malaria.

I have mention that though Ubol is in the backward eastern province of Thailand, much is being done to improve its position, and just outside the town itself is the Unesco Fundamental Education Centre. I asked what "fundamental education" meant but never received a satisfactory answer though it provoked an amusing argument between members of our party. All I can say is that this Fundamental Education Centre appears to be educating teachers who will later spread their ideas about the country.

There are only two other of these Fundamental Education Centres under Unesco in the world, one in Mexico and one in Egypt, and here in Ubol there were sixty students, thirty men and thirty women, with another sixty due to come in a few months' time. When we were there the centre had only been running for ten months and Nai Lamai Chulasamayr and Mr. A. J. Halls, who took us round and told us about the place, were full of enthusiasm for its future.

The teachers were, as should be the case, of various nationalities, British and American, Dutch, Danish and, of course, Thai, whilst the students were drawn from all over the country. Locally the organization is known as Tufec, the

Thailand Unesco Fundamental Education Centre, and according to the agreement signed between the government of Thailand and the United Nations the purpose of the centre is said to be "to study social and economic conditions in order to determine the needs and problems of the area of the country that can be solved by fundamental education; to train fundamental education specialists and field workers; and to produce educational material such as books, posters and audio-visual and other instructional material". Fundamental education was described in the agreement as "community education broadly conceived". So now you know, but I am afraid I am little the wiser.

The Thai students admitted to this educational centre are supposed to have had at least thirteen years education and been for several years in the government service as teachers; and every student will be asked to acquire some general knowledge of health, agriculture, education, home-making, village industry, social welfare and the production of instructional materials. So perhaps, at last, we are beginning to arrive at the meaning of fundamental education.

Four ampurs, with a total population of about a quarter of a million, are being used as an experimental area for Tufec, each ampur having its own characteristics and special problems. It will interest British and American readers to know that a course of instruction in the English language is an integral part of the programme of study.

The college buildings are large and pleasant from the dormitories, usually shared by two students, down to the kitchens and laundries, for everything is provided for the benefit of the people studying there. The library in particular interested me, for several reasons. It was a large room with a fair number of books printed both in English and Thai and large numbers of magazines and periodicals lying about. But when I examined the magazines to see the type of material which was provided for the students, I found that almost without exception the periodicals were American. I saw one copy of *The Sphere*, one of *Picture Post*, and one of *Illustrated*. These were the only representatives of Great Britain or in-

deed of the British Empire, and all were thoroughly out of date. Mr. Halls informed me regretfully that they could not get British magazines, that the British Council had said that their much needed funds would not permit them to help Tufec in this direction. On the other hand the Americans let them have all the literature they wanted. Here is a well-worthwhile opportunity for some British information to reach key teachers of a country which is very British in its affectations and in its modern outlook. Could not an organization like the W.V.S. or the Royal Empire Society, or even private individuals, send magazines and periodicals from time to time to this excellent institution? \* Decidedly, Tufec is one of the world's well-worthwhile organizations.

It is not only the staff who are enthusiastic, for the various students, to whom we talked in their rooms, were equally full of zeal for their task; as indeed one would expect the first draft of trainees in an institution of this sort to be. Their rooms were pleasantly and plainly furnished and as a side-light on Thai characteristics I cannot help mentioning the row upon row of immaculately clean and beautifully pressed white blouses and different coloured skirts I saw in the girls' rooms. I have mentioned what a cleanly nation the Thais are, and here was proof of it before my eyes. I have certainly never seen anything like it in any British university or college.

We had coffee with Mr. Halls and his wife and talked of his previous life in Papua and his experiences in Thailand, and were then for a change whisked off to visit the local mental hospital where, with pride, the Director told me that according to the statistics only one person in a thousand in Thailand was in need of mental treatment, whereas in Great Britain the proportion was one in three hundred and in the United States it was one in two hundred! Is this a reflection on modern civilization? A good deal of modern treatment is given here including shock therapy, deep sleep, etc. Contrary to the case in Great Britain I believe, there are more men patients than women.

Outside the Director's office I saw a battered old Standard Vanguard. I wondered if it belonged to one of the patients,

\* The W.V.S. is now sending regular supplies.



but decided that whoever owned it was in any case not quite mad for he had taken off the spats and apparently thrown them away. In Thailand I found these spats and their constant removal and replacement because of the frequent punctures, one of the biggest curses of the car and I have several times thought that the designer had qualified himself for a bed in the institution in Ubol—or was likely to send Vanguard drivers there.

Contrast seemed to rule our life in Ubol, as our next visit was to the fisheries station where carp and catfish are bred in artificial ponds and sold to the people. One of the keepers demonstrated with a large pole net so that we could see the size of the fish in the ponds. He carefully lowered it into the water and after sufficient pause to allow the fish to enter the net, raised the pole with a jerk to withdraw the fish but everything flew to bits. We could not help laughing at him, he looked so taken aback and disconsolate, but it was not long before he had the framework fixed up again and recommenced his operations. Several times he heaved up the net with five or six tiny fish three or four inches long lying on the meshes. It was extremely hot standing in the afternoon sun and, keen fisherman though I am, the entertainment began to pall and we decided to go home. But our policeman would not come with us. He asked us to go to the car and wait, so we slowly walked over and then drove as close as we could to pick him up. Every few minutes we saw a pole rise in the air and a net emerge from the water, but still the policeman did not come until, with a shout of joy, we saw him climbing up the steep bank which surrounded each of the ponds, with a large bucket in his hand, coming towards the car at the double. Proudly he dumped the bucket, half full of water, in the back of the car and there were five or six little fish, not more than six inches long, which he announced were for our dinner. And very good they were, too, when specially cooked for us by Han Chong Kon.

Though it felt hot in the bright sunshine it was in reality quite cool and the temperature in our bedroom in the afternoon, the hottest part of the day, was only 86° F.

One evening whilst we strolled in the streets of Ubol looking at the shops and watching the people, we heard a female voice call out in English.

"Welcome to our town."

We looked about to see where the words came from and at last saw a fair girl riding a bicycle. When she saw that we had noticed her she jumped off and came up to speak to us, explaining that she was one of several American missionaries stationed in Ubol and asked us if we would care to come back to her house to meet her friends. We did so and again learnt a good deal about the life of the people and the difficulties of missionaries in a Buddhist country, for Buddhism is such a good religion itself that there can be little inducement for the people to abandon it even for the best religion in the world. Two of the people to whom we talked had worked most of their lives in China and had not been long in Thailand. I gathered they were not making many converts. I cannot help thinking that it is rather presumptuous of the Christian races to think that they should send missionaries to proselytize people in lands which have a good and gentle religion so similar to our own and I must say that I was both amused and pleased when later on I saw an enormous hoarding with the painted sign "Headquarters of the Buddhist Mission to Europe". I wonder if Buddhism will gain many converts in our country or whether the Thai missionaries will be equally unsuccessful. I understand an immense sum of money is being raised in Thailand to provide funds for the building of a really fine Buddhist temple in London.

That night was a noisy one, perhaps as a contrast to the quiet missionaries with whom we had spent a peaceful evening. In the very early hours of the morning there came the heavy tramp of boots up the rickety uncarpeted stairs and along the wooden boards of the hall. Doors slammed around us, a car departed noisily. In the next room, open to ours for the top third of the partition, we heard a very noisy conversation begin and all around us in the hall our fellow guests started their morning clearing of throats and noisy hoicking. Even the lizards were more talkative than usual.

one set squawking rather like parrots and multitudes of little geckos ran about the walls and ceiling exclaiming "tut, tut" disparagingly. As the sun rose a first-rate dog fight involving most of the dogs in town, by the sound of it, started under our window. A cock hailed the dawn, loudly clapping its wings every few minutes and persistently crowing at the top of its voice. A nearby blacksmith commenced work—apparently by beating sheets of corrugated iron. Daylight had arrived, so we arose to look forward to another day in Ubol.

When we regretfully left we were seen off from the town in grand style by Nai Seni ("Sanoh"), the tennis champion; the Deputy Governor; the Chief of Police, who wore the wings of an officer of the Airborne Forces, and had with us a police sub-lieutenant in the car and a Landrover with three armed police to follow behind. We felt reasonably certain of getting to Roi Et and back to Maha Sarakham with this guard.

The country was well-wooded and rapidly turning green, with fresh leaves sprouting and buds blossoming almost as we looked at them. The country was poor and sandy as we travelled away from Ubol, becoming more sparsely wooded, and rice paddies made their appearance. In these grow sticky rice which needs a different method of cooking to that grown in the rest of the country. Also it is said not to be so nutritious, and sticky rice and lack of intelligence, according to the Thais, go together.

Before Yasatorn the road became very bad and rocky. In the village police tried to stop us, as they were diverting all traffic, for a reason which I never discovered, but our accompanying police officer told us to drive straight on. We did so, over such an awful road that I think this was quite possibly the reason for the diversion. For a long time we travelled at 10 to 15 m.p.h. and it was with relief that we arrived at Roi Et, after which we expected the roads to be better. Unfortunately they were not, and until we reached Maha Sarakham we went over one of the worst patches in the whole of our journey. But once there we were taken



again to the comfortable resthouse by the dam where lunch was waiting for us and we were delighted to see sumoh on the table. This sumoh, or pomelo, was a favourite fruit of ours as it was so refreshing. When we had been at Maha Sarakham on the outward journey we had asked for it but it was not available. The caretaker or one of the officials had, however, remembered our liking for it and there it was when we came back.

Nai Dhavaj Podhisundara, the Deputy Sheriff, called to see us again in the evening and stayed to chat for some time. After his departure, though it was comparatively early, I went to bed whilst my wife indulged in an Ali Baba which, in this case, was adjoining but not connected with our bedroom. Whilst she was there I heard the caretaker talking to someone, and took little notice of it thinking he was having a chat with the sentry, but when, a few minutes later, my wife came out of the bathroom and I heard her start chatting, I decided I had better get up and see what it was about. There, on the veranda, were a strange Thai gentleman and my wife, in the thinnest nylon nightgown with an almost equally thin dressing-gown, sitting comfortably in the cool of the evening discussing matters which were obviously of the highest import. Neither was the least embarrassed and so, clad only in pyjamas, I joined them. After a time, as our guest had not announced his identity, I asked who he was. He told me he was the Public Prosecutor and that the Governor had told him he had better come and see us as we were good people to argue with! So he stayed and argued until I was restraining my yawns and thinking of our dawn start the following day. What we talked about I have no idea, but none of us were at a loss for words and I think we enjoyed the Public Prosecutor's visit as much as I hope he enjoyed conversing with us.

Again I see a note in my diary, or rather a note made by my wife, to the effect that a spaniel must have strayed among the dogs at Maha Sarakham some time or other, for here again we saw a different type of hound to the others which I have noted, the nice brown dogs of most of the country, and

the black ones of Sukhothai and Pitsanulok. The spaniel-like creatures of this part of the eastern provinces are peculiar to the region. It takes all kinds to make a world, even among dogs.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### *Last Days*

We had yet another puncture a few miles after we had left Maha Sarakham and after changing the wheel stopped at Ban Phai to have the tube repaired. The work was done for us at the usual primitive looking but quite efficient place and a small crowd of about fifty adults, plus a lot of children assembled at once to watch the operation and to gaze at R. and me. R. says it was my costume which intrigued them as I was wearing a green absorbent cotton shirt, khaki shorts and white stockings. She further insults me by saying that they were intrigued by my figure, which may not be suited to shorts, but anyhow by this time my waist-line was considerably diminished.

Normally men in Thailand do not wear shorts for it is the costume of the schoolboy. I wore trousers during the first part of the journey but in the sticky heat they clung round my knees, particularly in the car and when climbing the interminable steps of temples or scrambling up mountain-sides, so I abandoned them for shorts, which were much cooler and more comfortable; although I always changed into trousers immediately we stopped for the day.

By the time the puncture was mended the crowd had more than doubled, grinning cheerfully, obviously making helpful (or rude?) suggestions to the man who was mending our puncture, smiling at us and peering into the car to see what we had inside. I am glad we were able to provide them with a few minutes amusement during the day.

These assemblies of people were always interesting for we saw so many different types of face and so many different costumes and odds and ends which were being carried from



place to place. At one point a naked small boy of about six years old appeared riding a hobby-horse—just the middle rib of a coconut palm leaf with a stouter piece of wood fixed at right angles at the end to represent the horse's head. He was very proud of his toy but when I took his photograph became most alarmed and relapsed into tears. He departed weeping copiously amidst the laughter of the onlookers and even refused to be comforted by the small gift of a bhat, which he clasped tightly in his hand as he rode away.

Soon afterwards we were met by Police Sub-Lieutenant Araya who had looked after us on our first visit to Korat and I was able to assure him that his prayers to Buddha had done their share in bringing us back safely.

Immediately we arrived at Korat the police took charge of our car and drove it off to wash and grease it for us as the steering had become very stiff. We had the same room in the hotel and the same lot of boys to look after us, for in these Thai hotels the chambermaids are small boys who appear to be ten or twelve years old but who are probably young men. There are lots of them and they pad about quietly in their bare feet, ready to attend to every want. They seem to be on duty for twenty-four hours a day and as very few of the bedroom doors have locks or proper fastenings (some indeed are only curtains in the door frame) they wander in and out of the rooms as they feel inclined, bringing tea at intervals or just coming in to see if they are wanted. Normally, too, boys waited on us at meals but at Korat, where the hotel had a very big and up-to-date restaurant, there were girl waitresses, pleasant smiling creatures who did their job efficiently. There were certainly no delays at any of these places as there would be at the majority of restaurants or hotel dining-rooms in England. Service with speed and cheerfulness seems to be one of the mottoes of Thailand.

I believe I have said that we did not see a single private car east of Korat, but I have not mentioned a practice which the police told us to adopt earlier in our journey. On approaching one of the narrow wooden bridges it is customary, if another vehicle is approaching from the opposite

direction, for the driver of the vehicle nearer the bridge to switch on his headlights to signify that he is coming over. The driver of the other car then goes slowly or, if necessary, stops to allow the first one to pass. But this headlight signal has other uses as well, for official cars will switch on their headlights if there is too much dust from an oncoming lorry or if the road is too narrow or the surface is very bad. At this signal the other car will promptly stop and pull in to the side of the road giving right of way and some freedom from dust to the user of the headlight signal. I could not discover exactly which officials are allowed to do this but we were told to use our headlights in this way on several occasions, by different authorities, and found that it invariably worked and the signal was obeyed promptly.

Back at Korat we had to all intents and purposes ended our journey for the road, over which we had to return to Bangkok, was one which we had previously used when going north and east.

We had a long distance to travel to Bangkok, the longest day's run of our journey. In addition, part of this was over some of the worst roads we had encountered and we were nearing the point of exhaustion. Fortunately we knew what was ahead and remembered that our last 100 miles or so from Lopburi to Bangkok would be over a good tarred surface.

We left Korat just before dawn and after seven miles of tarred road and a fair surface for another fifty miles, ran on to a bad patch. Then the road became hilly and winding and ran through dense jungle. This appears to be a wild part of the country for the roadmen and others moving about carried guns or revolvers. R., who has a sense of colour, kept exclaiming at the rich scarlet of the waist scarves and sometimes the head-dresses worn by the men, the colour contrasting well with the blue clothing which was generally their attire.

When we reached the long and sandy road diversion where we had a puncture on our outward journey, we found the surface vastly improved for there had been rain the day

before and the surface was hard and gave a grip to the tyres. Flowers, too, had sprung up beside the road since our last passing, for in this climate the coming of rain transforms the countryside almost in a night. Masses of yellow flowers on stems about a foot high with five yellow petals overlapping each other, with bright yellow stamens having maroon-coloured tips and a plum-coloured pistil, made miles of the countryside beautiful. Flowers like evening primroses were also quite common and before we reached Koke Samrong we saw many plantations of kapok trees. Then we went over a particularly bad patch of road which I remembered. Looking at my notes written in the car on this stretch, I find they are barely readable. Just before Lopburi we met the first private car, outside a town, which we had seen in over a thousand miles' travelling and shortly afterwards ran on to the good tarred road which took us all the way to Bangkok. It was comparatively cool, the temperature being only 98° F. in the car.

We arranged to stay at the Oriental Hotel when we reached the capital, but the tangle of streets completely defeated us and we had no idea which road to take. We had lost ourselves hopelessly in the middle of Bangkok, having said good-bye to our last escort in Lopburi. Finally I went into a quick lunch bar nearby and found a man who spoke English. I asked him the way to the Oriental Hotel, which he explained but as the road was obviously complicated though not very long, I offered him ten bhat to come in the car with us and show us the way. He hesitated for a second, for he was either the owner or one of the attendants of the place. Then he asked one of the customers to take his place behind the bar for a few minutes and jumped in the car with us. We were soon at our hotel and I thanked him producing the promised ten bhat. He flatly refused to take the money and said he was only too glad to be able to help English people. I then asked him to at least allow me to pay for a taxi back to his bar but even that he would not have, saying he could easily go by bus, and even refused his bus fare. The Thais can teach us many lessons in courtesy to foreigners.



## THAILAND JOURNEY

Bangkok was in a state of upheaval. The SEATO Conference was due to take place in a few days and foreign delegations from many countries were swamping the limited accommodation that the hotels of the town had to offer. In consequence the Oriental Hotel told me that we could only stay for a few days though I pointed out to them that we had booked for a considerably longer period. The manageress, a tiny attractive Thai lady, Ankana Kalantananda, told me that the Government had taken two-thirds of their accommodation, but on my being very insistent she asked me to see the managing director, Madame Krull (*une vraie femme formidable!*) who had done gallant work in West Africa during the war. Madame Krull and I had our interview the following day. It started somewhat stormily but an armistice was declared when we found that we had both served in West Africa and peace soon followed, as some years previously she also had motored to Chiang Mai. We were allowed to keep our rooms and I look forward to seeing Madame Krull and Ankana again.

The first evening we were aroused in our bedroom, where we had retired almost immediately after arriving, by the roaring as of a tremendous conflagration and shortly afterwards dense clouds of smoke swirled over the balcony into our room. I jumped up thinking that the place was on fire but on looking outside I saw a most peculiar contraption being driven slowly along the lane at the back of the hotel, a hose-pipe coming from its interior and a man at the end of the hose-pipe directing the nozzle into the bushes and drains that ran beside the hotel. From the nozzle came the roaring sound and the dense clouds of insecticide which was being used all over the city to kill off the mosquitoes, prior to the arrival of the SEATO delegates. This became a nightly performance, the surroundings of the hotel, the grass of the lawn running down to the river and every place where mosquitoes might be expected, received its nightly dose of gas and we had our evening's amusement in watching the reactions of new arrivals, who behaved exactly as we did the first time we had heard it. In some cases there were

shrieks of genuine fright from women who had accompanied their husbands to the conference. I have my doubts as to the efficiency of these giant flit guns and wonder whether they killed off the mosquitoes or simply drove them into the hotel, for certainly our room seemed to have more insects in it after the nightly visitation than it had when we were left in peace. However the management provided us with a normal flit gun and the windows and doors were covered with wire gauze but every evening before going to bed I carried out a nightly slaughter of our numerous invaders who came in easily, despite the gauze, through the cracks of the ill-fitting doors.

We had delayed visits to Ayuthya, the ancient capital of Thailand for so many years and, Bang-Pa-In, the summer residence of the kings of Thailand, until we returned to Bangkok, as both of them are only about fifty miles north of the capital.

Our visits to these places had to be postponed and return visits to the Royal Palace and other lovely spots which we had been promising ourselves we would see once more cancelled, because immediately we got back to Bangkok R. went down with an attack of dengue fever. As she was completely tired out she had a rather bad time for a few days, but the local doctor soon had her on her feet again.

Captain Bisdar, who had watched over our progress and with whom I had kept in touch during our tour, came with us to Ayuthya to act as our guide. Whilst serving in the army with the Engineers he had been stationed there for a considerable time and knew the place well.

We set out for Bang-Pa-In travelling on the good Lopburi road, but when we branched off to make the last ten miles or so to the old summer palace, Bisdar was astonished to find the surface not so good and was still more astonished when in reply to his questions we said the majority of the roads in Thailand were far worse than this one.

Messages had been sent to the people in charge at Bang-Pa-In from the Court Chamberlain's office warning them of our arrival, but the gates were locked and Bisdar had to

## THAILAND JOURNEY

search for an official to let us in, after explaining that he had the authority of the Chamberlain to take us over the place. After twenty-four hours the telegram had not arrived and there was no telephone.

Frankly I was rather disappointed with Bang-Pa-In, possibly because of the lack of any animation about the place. Even the buildings themselves seemed to possess no life and to me most buildings do have a very real expression about them. Everywhere were klongs and ponds, the river Chao Phraya running beside the grounds. In several places clumps of bougainvillea added a little gaiety to the scene and here and there pleasant bridges crossed the klongs. We saw three main buildings, one, the principal residence of the time when the royal families of Thailand used it, built in a rather unprepossessing French style. Further away was a much more interesting Chinese house given by the population of Chinese descent as a present to the king. This is an amazing erection with an ornate tiled roof ornamented with dragons in every possible position. Inside the detail work was beautiful. Pierced wood screens stood before the windows, lovely porcelain china tiles covered the floor, and the decorations, lacquer work and mosaic were ornate in the extreme. The whole was furnished with elaborate Chinese furniture. A perfectly lovely place to look at but, I imagine, not so convenient to live in.

The gem of Bang-Pa-In is a little pavilion built in the middle of a small lake. In it is a statue of King Chulalongkorn. Access is only by boat, but this is a perfect jewel of ornamental oriental architecture, every detail of which is reflected in the mirror-like surface of the lake. Masses of lotuses covered most of the other ponds, but unfortunately they were not in bloom.

On thinking back I cannot understand why Bang-Pa-In did not impress me more, because there was much that was beautiful and some that was lovely in the place. Perhaps it was the spirits of the queen and her children who were drowned in the river a few miles away because no one dared to save them, that oppressed me. In those times the penalty



for touching a member of the royal family was death at once so the courtiers stood by and watched the queen and royal children struggle in the water until they disappeared. There is a little monument to this tragedy in the grounds.

All the places are comparatively modern; there is nothing ancient about Bang-Pa-In. It is no longer used as a summer residence by the royal family and in fact, I believe, is very rarely visited by members of the dynasty apart from Prince Chula himself, who when he is in Thailand sometimes picnics in the grounds. A melancholy place which I completely failed to understand.

We left Bang-Pa-In and retraced our steps to the main road, only to turn off a few miles further on to Ayuthya. This by-road was being made up when we went over it and should be quite good.

Ayuthya is to me in some ways rather a puzzle. It was founded in 1350 and a century later became the capital of the kingdom which was moved from Pitsanulok. For over 400 years it was a great city, its population growing to almost a million people. Ambassadors from the kings of England, France and the Netherlands came here to present their credentials from their sovereigns to the king of Thailand. Then it was attacked by the Burmese in one of the many wars between the two countries. It was captured and sacked and the whole city, said to cover nearly forty square miles, was laid waste. The population declined from a million to ten thousand people and the capital was moved to Thonburi. No effort has ever been made to restore or rebuild the place and to-day one wanders about among piles of brick and stone, seeing ruins everywhere, some partially cleared of the vegetation which has overgrown them, others peeping out from the dense bush which covers the site.

I cannot understand the calm acceptance of the sack of Ayuthya with no attempt whatsoever to restore it to its former greatness. After 417 years one would have thought it had become firmly fixed as the capital of a growing country. But no, it was captured by the enemy, it was laid waste, and after that it was allowed to disintegrate into the ruins which

are all one sees to-day.\* Apart from its historical value, the tremendous area of the site and one or two minor things like the enormous image of Buddha still sitting in its ruined temple, there is little reason for visiting Ayuthya. There is no beauty left, only a sense of sadness and desolation; a feeling of grief for something which was at one time great.

Bisdar took us to see his old barracks and was shocked at the changes he found. He mentioned laughingly that when he was stationed there most of the transport from Bangkok was by river as the roads were almost non-existent and travel by elephant or bullock-cart took a long time. Yet Bisdar is a comparatively young man, and many changes in transport and way of life have taken place during a small part of his lifetime.

We went to the modern town, a mile or so away from the ruined city, and had the usual good and mixed meal that we had learnt to enjoy in these places. The man who waited on us spoke far better English than usual and when I questioned him I learnt that he had been in the Chinese Air Force during the last war as a radio-operator machine-gunner and had been trained in the U.S.A., where he had learnt his English.

Our time in Thailand had come to an end. We took our car down to the shipping company to be sent back to England, for we intended to fly home. It was running as perfectly as ever despite the rough way in which it had been treated. Apart from the odd bits that had dropped off on the bumpy roads nothing of any serious nature was wrong with it as far as I could see. We had many punctures but apart from this the only repair which was carried out was the re-packing of the back axle from which oil was leaking. I dare-say the shock absorbers have had their day and there may be one or two things which will be revealed when the car is overhauled, but as I write this I am still waiting for it to return to England. As I said, we flew back.

The last day was spent in revisiting the Marble Temple which we had admired so much. We had no time for our

\* I am told it was not restored for strategic reasons.

promised meandering again in the Royal Palace. R's. dengue prevented that. And the last thing of all which we did was to take a launch and go slowly down the river almost to the sea and back to our hotel, watching the river life, waving to the merry, naked children bathing in the muddy water or sitting on the steps of the ramshackle houses which line the banks, and admiring the sight of the roofs and pagodas of the Wat Arun and the Royal Palace as we saw them from the river. This was really our good-bye to Bangkok.

Next day we motored twenty-six miles to Dom Muang, the airport from which B.O.A.C. were to take us back to England. We waved farewell to the city as we flew over it and then by degrees made our way to Singapore, Ceylon and India, to the Persian Gulf, to the Lebanon, to Italy and finally home. It is amazing when one realizes the ramifications and the world wide spread of British Overseas Airways and despite the criticisms which are sometimes levied against the corporation, the speed, comfort and punctuality of the service are remarkable.

We landed at London Airport in the dark and shortly afterwards were back in our club in London.

And so back to Cornwall with winter still lying over the countryside, though it should have been spring, with few flowers showing and fewer green leaves on the trees than we had seen in Thailand. As we huddled beside a large wood fire we thought of the sun and warmth of Bangkok. Even the temperature of 102° F. which we had left behind us in the Thai capital seemed good compared with the cold greyness of the English countryside. We missed the colour and animation and cheerfulness of everybody and everything. We even missed the noise, the samlohs and the complicated traffic. Perhaps one day we may return and revisit some of the places which interested us so much and meet again many of the friends we made in that far eastern country.

But if it will still be possible to revisit Thailand, or whether Thailand will have disappeared behind an iron or bamboo curtain, time alone will show.



## *Two Conversations*

### I

#### *Home again*

I visited the local butcher to order the weekend joint.

"It's so nice to see you back, Major, I hope you enjoyed yourself. We've been so much looking forward to your return. Your copies of *The Times* are the only decent papers we have to wrap the meat up in."

### II

#### *To my wife*

"Yes, my dear, you *are* looking well. I *am* surprised but it's very nice to see you again." Pause. "Don't you think you're too old to go on journeys like this?"

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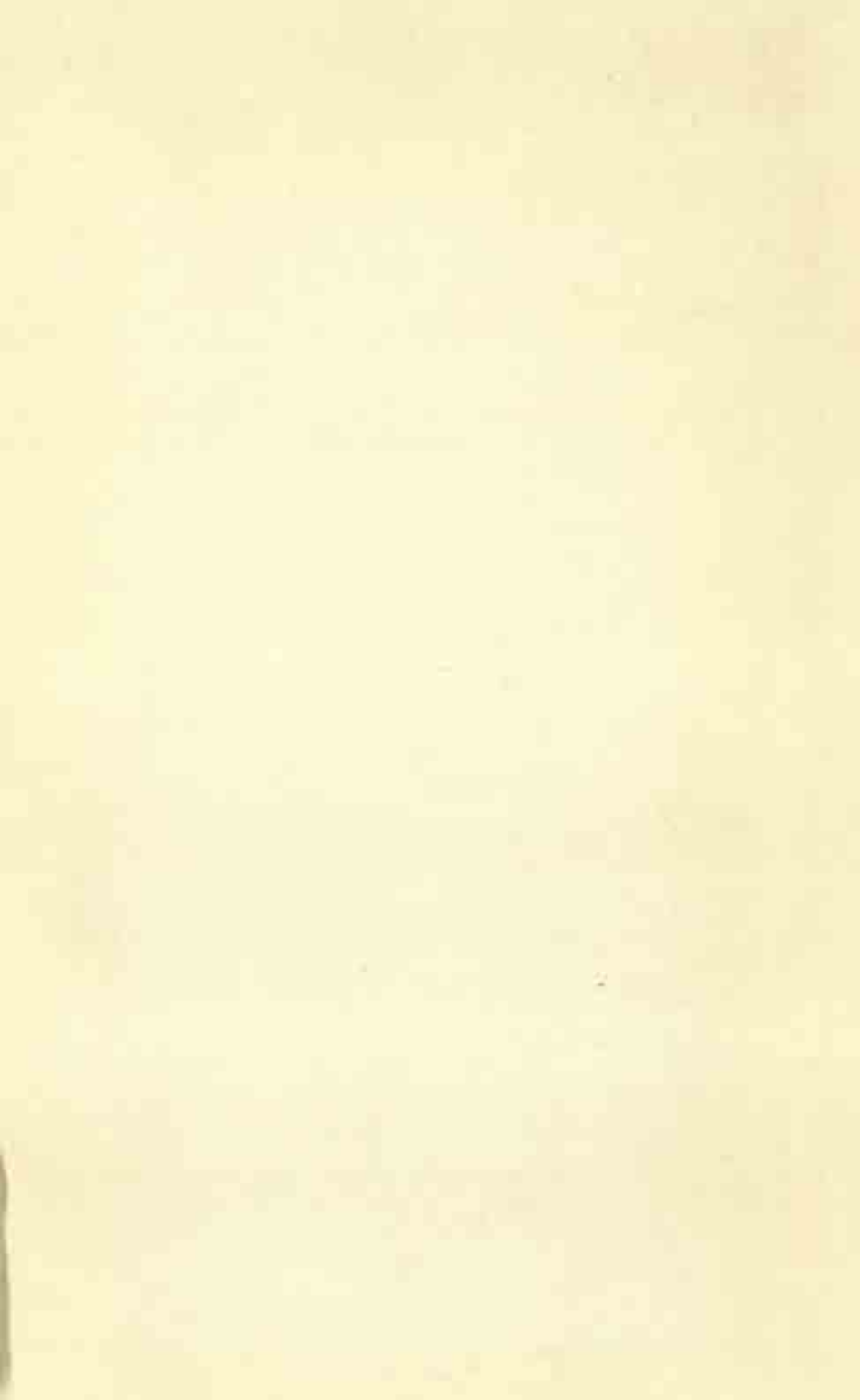
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